

**“LAND TO THE TILLER! EDUCATION FOR ALL!”:
CONSTELLATING THE ETHIOPIAN STUDENT MOVEMENT AND THE
BLACK RADICAL TRADITION**

by

Solyana Bekele

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Africana Studies

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This manuscript is dedicated to those Ethiopian students, whose dream for a revolutionary Ethiopia lives within us today.

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ABSTRACT

The 1960s Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM), a moment where the youth's radical fervor and commitment to a socialist Ethiopia was a harbinger of the end of empire, is a significant moment in the trajectory of Ethiopian political history worth intervening and reconstituting as part of the Black Radical Tradition (BRT). Ethiopia's presumed history of remaining uncolonized in the face of European domination has created a "picturesque medievalism of kings and queens" while masking the "overwhelming reality of the misery" of the Ethiopian people.¹ And despite the sustenance of this misleading image, scholars have attempted to establish Ethiopia's albeit differing coloniality and the emergent decolonial politic embraced by Ethiopian students and activists in the mid-century against Haile Selassie II's feudal and imperialist empire. This study aims to intervene here and contribute to the scholarship regarding the ESM to show how the Ethiopian students' ideological posture on the socioeconomic and national questions of Ethiopia was a manifestation of the phenomenon that is the BRT. Resituating the ESM within this inherited tradition establishes Ethiopia's radical past, more accurately, as part of the transnational Black

¹ Ethiopian Students Union in North America, "Repression in Ethiopia," *Africa Research Group* 5, (1971): 1.

revolt uninterested in reformation, but rather socialist world-building—a moment in Ethiopian history overlooked, simplified and relentlessly critiqued.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“The questions and answers posed by the student movement are hardly ever linked to longer social, political, or economic trajectories that have framed Ethiopian, African, or even global history, and neither the student movement nor the revolution is analysed in terms of policy impacts or *continuities* with other African or third world countries.”²

- Elleni Centime Zeleke

In the era of decolonization and independence, African people were embracing radical politics in their fight against colonial and imperialist rule. This politic was manifest in the worldwide popularity of Marxism and the practical uses it had for people who were living under foreign domination. This radical politic was further bolstered and reconstituted to the various African conditions by great African leaders and theoreticians like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Thomas Sankara, and Amilcar Cabral. Despite their varying interpretations of the uses of Marxism in the fight against colonialism, all united under the total expulsion of European colonialism in all its forms. This wave of radical fervor sweeping the continent however is perceived to fall short or seen as

² Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964-2016*, (Boston: Brill, 2019): 9.

culturally dislocated³ once it reaches the Blue Nile and the Horn of Africa, namely Ethiopia. This study seeks to trouble that notion by using the Black Radical Tradition as a lens of examination.

The radical spark that eventually caught the entire continent afire was not simply a moment in African history put out by the pages of history, state repression, or because of its failure and contemporary dismissal. The students at the University College of Addis Ababa (UCAA), like many other African students of the 1960s and 1970s undertook Kwame Nkrumah's call:

Students should establish close links with the workers and provide the spark needed to set in motion demonstrations, strikes, boycotts and armed insurrection. Effective student-worker co-operation can paralyse a reactionary power structure and compel change.⁴

Even before this impassioned call in 1968, African students and workers across the continent were in many ways responding to Nkrumah's call to unite and resist on the very day of Ghana's independence.

On March 5, 1957, Nkrumah emphatically states that "our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa."⁵ It is this Pan-African consciousness that Nkrumah worked to establish throughout his political career, as a united Africa was for him the surest way of combatting imperialism in all its forms. It is no coincidence that when he addressed UCAA students in 1958, Nkrumah expressed

³ Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-1974* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

⁴ Kwame Nkrumah, *Handbook of Revolutionary Warfare* (London: PANAFA, 1968), 88.

⁵ "Kwame Nkrumah's Independence Day Speech," *Ghana News Agency* (Accra), March 9, 2020.

his hope to see an exchange of students between UCAA and the University of College of Ghana.⁶ This was an exchange that took place under Haile Selassie's patronage but ironically was one of many infinitesimal acts that led to the radicalization of the students and, later, his undoing. The tumultuous 1960s was a transnational phenomenon which found its expression in Africa as national liberation struggles; struggles usually characterized by either a Marxist-Leninist orientation, armed resistance, or both.

In western Africa, Amilcar Cabral and the Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) were waging a bloody war against the Portuguese, whose colonial domination stretched back centuries. Moving eastward over the dry, arid Sahel, and southeasterly across the Rivers Congo, Tanganyika, and Malawi brings one to another intense struggle in Mozambique, waged by Eduardo Mondlane and Samora Machel with the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO). It was clear that the 1960s marked a significant shift in the various consciousness of African people who had had it with colonialism and were better situated to accept and embrace radical changes to the impossible situations colonialism had left them in. What seem like disparate scenes of resistance, stretched across the large expanse of land that is Africa, were multi-pronged assaults that had to take radical measures to combat the enormous "breach"⁷ that were colonialism and imperialism.

Zooming out to gauge the political effervescence of the 1960s, the question of the war in Vietnam, and the Cold War politics that engendered such a war, colored every

⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement c. 1960-1974* (New York: James Currey, 2014), 102.

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2022).

aspect of international relations. Harold Marcuse and the “New Left” also came to dominate much of leftist politics in this historical moment and influenced the Black liberation movements in the U.S. that eventually grew to espouse an internationalist consciousness. In Oakland, California, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale (who met while they were students at Merritt College)⁸ were uniting to create the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, one of the most prominent leftist groups that grew to outwardly condemn the war and American imperialism abroad, in conjunction with their stance against what they saw was U.S. domestic colonialism in Black communities. In many instances, it was student movements or agitations particularly that were initiating and leading the fight against oppressive orders.

1.1 Student Movements in Africa

However, the progressive and change-seeking characteristic common to the youth can be a point of both celebration and critique. Celebrated because activism among the youth is appreciated as a sign that they care about the world around them and see themselves as active players who could shape the world they are destined to inherit; and critiqued because this same fervor can be received as utopian and idealistic dreams that are impractical and unrealistic. Though both positions retain a crumb of truth, it does not obliterate the real progressive changes student movements have inspired by awakening various classes and groups within a given society. This is true of the African students in the 20th century.

⁸ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire* (California, University of California Press, 2013).

The context of colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism inspired radical resistance and anticolonial sentiments that informed the political orientation of various student movements in midcentury Africa. In the introduction to *The role of African student movements in the political and social evolution of Africa from 1900 to 1975*, Adu Boahen notes that the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the “impact of international communism and the communist parties of France and the United Kingdom on African students and political leaders,”⁹ and the repressive and brutal methods colonial orders employed to silence resistance were factors that inspired the rise of politically active and radical student movements throughout parts of Africa—the Maghreb, the North, the West, and East.

African student movements were in many cases the main organizations that produced the future leaders of post-independence Africa. Boahen notes that “many of those who played a part in the contemporary history of Africa, particularly since the 1950s, served their apprenticeship in the ranks of the student movements.”¹⁰ Not only were student movements producers of great leaders but also leading bodies of agitators for *Uhuru*. African students

participated actively in, if not initiated, the cultural and anti-colonial movements of the time by injecting them with an element of mass participation and radicalism and thereby hastening the downfall of colonialism. But they bequeathed an even more important legacy: the need to fight neo-colonialism, establish genuine democracy and mass participation in decision-making, and achieve African unity and pan-Africanism.¹¹

⁹ Adu Boahen, “Introduction,” in *The role of African student movements in the political and social evolution of Africa from 1900 to 1975*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 16.

¹⁰ Adu Boahen, “Introduction,” in *The role of African student movements*, ” 7.

¹¹ Adu Boahen, “Introduction,” in *The role of African student movements*, ” 23.

Despite their established impact on the political scene of Africa during independence, the level of importance placed on them can be circumscribed by their relative youth, and in many cases, their failure in establishing African states totally free from colonialism and the legacy of subservience it has imposed on Africans well into the 21st century. This failure can at best inspire rigorous curiosity on the part of historians to understand what exactly went wrong or at worst, relentless critique for inadvertently being harbingers of misery by upsetting colonial masters. The same masters that continued to wreak havoc in Africa through neo-colonialism. However, this is misplaced critique. Student movements in Africa should be studied honestly for what they sought to achieve for the benefit of all Africans through a Pan-African consciousness, as well as for how they conceptualized their ultimate mission as a collective. The mission to embody the

growing movement for social change...to try to understand and to articulate those goals, to try to assess and to understand the present state of society and how it might change, what alternative forms there are for the future, to try to persuade and to organize and ultimately to act collectively where they can, and individually if it comes to that.¹²

Radical student movements are products of their time and environment, not anachronistic events that disturb a predetermined historical track. As such, apprehending, reexamining, and reconfiguring the modern consequences of this past, especially in a state whose government denies its own history, is paramount to knowing what to do when this inevitably happens again. Despite the horrors of Haile Selassie's imperial rule

¹² Noam Chomsky, "In Defense of the Student Movement," The Noam Chomsky Website, Accessed March 11, 2025, https://chomsky.info/1971____03/.

and the ensuing explosive revolution of 1974, the gilded image, the symbolism of independent Ethiopia has remained. This image fails to capture the neo-colonial and imperialist influences, of which Ethiopia was under in every way but occupation, that led to the revolution. This is where the Ethiopian students embrace Marxism, take center stage and ignite a movement that recognized the external and internal aspects of Ethiopia's neo-coloniality (though the phrases used were "anti-imperialism" and "anti-feudalism") and embrace radicalism to build a new society rather than to simply destroy the old one.

Hence despite its suddenness, the revolution was a fire slowly burning under the surface for decades, fanned and fed by the university students of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. The radicalization process of these students and their subsequent break with Haile Selassie's empire has been mapped out extensively by Bahru Zewde in his book *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, C. 1960-1974*. Bahru¹³ builds this reading of history after reviewing the existing writings on the Ethiopian Student Movement and arguing that some are either dismissive, celebratory, and generally incomplete. Bahru challenges the arguments made in Messay Kebede's *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia, 1960-74*, in which the popularity of Marxism was seen as a cultural dislocation and an internalization of Eurocentric notions of radicalism. Bahru, however, posits that a more assured analysis is one that takes into consideration the "structural causes" of Haile Selassie's regime that contributed to student radicalization, the inability of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to serve as the

¹³ There is no family name in the Ethiopian and Eritrean naming system, hence authors will be referred to by their given name (first name). However, they are listed under their father's name (last name) in references for consistency.

“basis of Ethiopia’s modernization,” and the worldwide popularity of Marxism that situates Ethiopian students as agents in a global phenomenon rather than as an “aberration without any socio-economic basis.”¹⁴

Bahru then provides a general outline to situate the ESM “as a historical phenomenon” that must be “understood within the context of its time,” in an effort to draw a “nuanced picture rather than one of celebration or castigation.”¹⁵ Bahru manages to escape such celebration or castigation by studying the students, their activism and politic, as they presented themselves in their time; taking into account their internal and external influences, and their various reactions to significant events and uprisings—rather than dismissing them as immature and mimetic creatures riding the new trend that was Marxism.¹⁶ By “placing the movement first within first its global and then its national contexts,” Bahru attempts to capture the mood and outlook of the students “exactly as it happened” rather than as “it should have been.”¹⁷ Bahru’s almost-exhaustive work of tracking the development of the ESM is the latest installation of its kind. It provides the inspiration and basis for this reading of the ESM under the larger historical backdrop that is the Black Radical Tradition.

This study aims to draw a more nuanced image of what the students were thinking, how structural issues influenced those thoughts, and what they did about it. Though this study falls short of the revolution and tracks the students as their ideologies developed, it is not necessarily a chronological rendering of their radicalization. Rather, this study is

¹⁴ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, 8.

¹⁵ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia*, 9.

¹⁷ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 9.

concerned with an interpretation of the ESM within the disparate parameters of the BRT. Ethiopia's perceived independence has complicated the process of analyzing Ethiopia under a lens that is similar to the anti-colonial resistance against colonial masters—despite the liminality of the independence. The Black Radical Tradition, the “revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experiences of Black people,”¹⁸ is not easily summoned when thinking about the ESM for this misguided reason. Ethiopian people did not neatly escape the colonial and imperialist attack on Africa that defined the historical experiences of Black people in the last half-millennia.¹⁹

Nevertheless, closer inquiries have proved that despite escaping the clutches of direct colonialism and settler-colonialism like many of her neighbors, Ethiopia has embraced colonial relationships with the West that have established her as the “test-case” for neo-colonialism:²⁰ colonialism disguised under the perfect mask that is independence and sovereignty. As such, radical resistance, especially when anti-colonial and anti-imperial rhetoric are employed, must be analyzed under the larger historical phenomena that is the Black Radical Tradition. This is because such contextualization not only dignifies but connects Ethiopians to a larger phenomenon of Black resistance evident within and without the African continent.

¹⁸ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 169.

¹⁹ Bonnie Holcomb & Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1990).

²⁰ Bonnie Holcomb & Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia*, xvi.

1.2 Methodology

This study aims to analyze the development of the ESM from 1960 until the beginning of the revolution in 1974, while emphasizing that the radical nature of the students' politics was not only part of the global student movement of the mid 20th century but an expression of the Black Radical Tradition as well—first manifest in the enslaved Africans' revolts in the Americas and the mutinies of the oceans. This query also aims to answer the large questions that arise when attempting to resituate the ESM under the BRT: What is the Black Radical Tradition? What role did Marxism and Black/Ethiopian intellectuals play in this tradition? And where does the Ethiopian Student Movement fit in? To answer these questions, this study will look at student publications, propaganda, impassioned political tracts written by student leaders, as well data reflecting the socio-economic reality of the country (i.e. land system, exports, class relations, etc.).

Though there are multiple contingents of the student movement, a branch in North America, Europe, and Africa, this thesis will attempt to employ a telescopic view of the movement for thematic coherence. Using the students' own words to analyze their ideological posture will be crucial to understanding the changes they wanted to effect on-the-ground and in the consciousness of the masses of Ethiopians. Unearthing the Ethiopian students as part of the BRT will require the examination of their written works because as burgeoning revolutionary elites, they expressed their political orientation and activism through both demonstrations and protests, but also knowledge production.

1.3 Significance of Research

Classifying Ethiopia's radical past in the historical phenomenon that is the BRT builds a more complete historiography of Ethiopia's past and dignifies the political struggles and activism of students that were genuinely interested in building a nation that is a multi-ethnic democracy rather than one that merely claims to be. I employ Ama Mazama's notion of dignity and dignification from her essay, "Africology and the Question of Disciplinary Language"²¹ (where, among other things, she emphasizes is the *raison d'être* of Black Studies) in this study because it endeavors to begin from a point of recognizing student agency rather than simple imitation. As Maimire Mennasemay argues in *Qiné Hermeneutics and Ethiopian Critical Theory*, there is a prevailing understanding of Ethiopian history—that "The only way Ethiopia could change...would be through the action of an external mover: the one who gives Ethiopians knowledge and technical skills, financial aid and investment, food, medicine, and...liberates her from the inertia of the rest in which she is."²² It is with this caution and forbearance that this query troubles the all too easily accepted idea that the students who initiated a revolution were simply acting out of foreign influence—especially when the regime they were resisting accused them of the same thing.²³

Another aspect of significance comes from the question raised by Messay Kebede: Why did the Ethiopian intelligentsia choose such a radical path toward redressing their

²¹ Ama Mazama, "Africology and the Question of Disciplinary Language," *Journal of Black Studies* 52, no. 5 (2021): 449.

²² Maimire Mennasemay, *Qiné Hermeneutics and Ethiopian Critical Theory* (Los Angeles: Tsehai Publishers, 2021), 16.

²³ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 155.

issues with the government when reformist and centrist path were available to them?²⁴

Messay cedes that there are various explanations of the socio-economic kind that aim to answer this question, but unhappiness and grimes with the imperial government alone seem to him unsatisfactory. Reading this historical moment under the BRT phenomena, however, provides a stronger and alternative explanation because 1) it begins from a dignified position of assuming African agency; and 2) provides a framework, pattern and historical basis for the ways Black people have resisted—through which the ESM can be read.

Though the ability to act autonomously is for the most part an inherent part of being human, this study nevertheless feels the responsibility to highlight agency because of a dominant narrative of *tabula rasa* that plagues the study of Ethiopia and Ethiopian people. True, the enormous breach that is enslavement, colonial, and imperialist domination of African people has made any action against it seem like a futile endeavor that expends nothing but energy. However, these acts cannot entirely be chalked up to foreign influence and attempts at saving the West from itself. They should rather be seen as moments of disruption even if victory (whatever that may look like) is not imminent. Saidiya Hartman's conceptualization of what resistance looks like against a totalizing system of oppression can be useful here. Hartman writes, "Everyday practices of the enslaved encompassed an array of tactics...these small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and

²⁴ Adebabay Media, "Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation in Ethiopia," YouTube, December 13, 2020, video, 8:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixF1wgLZlgU&t=1278s&ab_channel=AdebabayMedia.

exploited openings in the system for the use of the enslaved.”²⁵ Though Hartman argues this in the context of American enslavement, this concept of resistance as disruption, without promising the obliteration of oppressive forces, is a useful conceptualization of the power of the powerless and how students made use of what they had even if Haile Selassie’s downfall was not imminent.

1.4 Historiography

Working one’s way from the early writings on the ESM, one finds that Randi Rønning Balsvik’s *Haile Sellassie’s Students* to be the first of its kind and depth. Written and compiled in the days before the revolution, Balsvik’s work was met with challenges of both the political and logistical kind. Part of Balsvik’s approach was also an examination of the student publications available to her. Despite being in Addis Ababa at the time of research and writing, Balsvik’s access to materials students produced was limited by the delicate political environment that existed between the government and university students. Despite this impediment, however, Balsvik presents a chronological rendering of the radicalization of students and various documentary evidence, like first-hand accounts, that accompany her narrative. This is preceded by a detailed account of the qualitative and quantitative data illuminating the context and environment that colored the Ethiopian students’ future mobilization. This text is the natural first step to investigating the ESM as it provides a “solid documentary base—including as it does above all government newspapers, student publications, official university records and

²⁵ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes*, 84.

110 interviews.”²⁶ Though Balsvik is praised for her “painstaking detail,” there remains a lack of analytical rigor that neither puts the Ethiopian students’ consciousness into the larger context of African or world developments²⁷ nor analyzes the *raison d’être* and nature of student movements as Bahru does. Nevertheless, Balsvik’s work does enjoy the privileges of temporal and physical proximity to the events it covers and provides a satisfactory narrative of the internal causes that led to the radicalization of the students. This documentary base has been built upon by ensuing studies that have focused on various aspects of the ESM—whether it be the American contingent or European.

Significant studies succeeding Balsvik’s, between the mid 1970s and late 1980s, have mostly been limited to dissertations. A dissertation by Alem Asres examines the American component of the ESM to “extrapolate its effects on social change” in Ethiopia.²⁸ Here, Alem tracks the ideological development of the Ethiopian Student Association in North America (hereafter ESANA/ESUNA), noting that though it was employing Marxist language and conceptual tools to analyze and make sense of the political and economic situation in Ethiopia, it was not openly Marxist: ESUNA “was [at first] solely anti-feudal and anti-imperialist using the most readily available means to

²⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 4.

²⁷ Tom Killion, review of *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background to Revolution, 1952-1977*, by Randi Ronning Balsvik, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 1 (1988): 169, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/219918>.

²⁸ Alem Asres, “History of the Ethiopian Student Movement (in Ethiopia and North America): Its impact on internal social change, 1960-1974,” PhD diss., (University of Maryland College Park, 1990).

achieve that end.”²⁹ Though Bahru has maintained that the ESM generally suffered from a lack of theoreticians “who were able to interpret the Ethiopian reality through the creative application of Marxist theory,”³⁰ ESANA/ESUNA were among the best organized to produce empirical studies in their organ *Challenge* that provided the “literature which formed both the rationale and theoretical basis for direct action against feudalism and U.S. imperialism in Ethiopia.”³¹ These would later inspire “direct actions [that] were taken primarily by Ethiopian citizens inside Ethiopia.”³² Other dissertations like Beyene Negawo’s have examined the negative impacts that education has posed on the political attitudes of university students. Though Beyene’s study was also in the midst of the chaos and also faced the challenges of data collection in an uncontrolled environment, his study concluded that as university students progressed in their education, their scores on “distrust,” and “alienation,” toward the government increased.

The impact of education on Ethiopian students during the tumultuous sixties has been investigated in a longer 2019 work by Elleni Centime Zeleke in *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and knowledge Production, 1964-2016*. Here, Elleni is concerned with looking at the ways in which the literature produced by members of the student movement impacted the social sciences within Ethiopia, and how this in turn influenced the practical policies of the post-revolutionary period first within the Derg regime and later with the establishment of EPRDF in 1991. Elleni is not necessarily concerned with a

²⁹ Alem Asres, 145.

³⁰ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 138.

³¹ Alem Asres, 139.

³² Alem Asres, 139.

documentary of the ESM (Balsvik does that in 1985, and more recently, Bahru in 2014), but rather, Elleni is grappling with “why...the multi-layered trans-national aspect of the Ethiopian student movement [is] so often ignored, and what does this fact tell us about *how the story of the history of ideas in Ethiopia is told?* [my emphasis].”³³ Elleni finds that the late-coming or “lack of social sciences” in Ethiopia during the time the students were attempting to effect change, would have necessarily placed an added burden of being both agents of change and producers of knowledge said change can pull from.

This study serves as a specificized documentary of the publications of the ESM in relation to the students’ attempt to produce a social scientific knowledge base that both justifies their actions and becomes the means through which they, knowingly or not, will operationalize their theories once the revolution has been won. Elleni also raises a pertinent question regarding a gap in the historiography of the student movement:

The questions and answers posed by the student movement are hardly ever linked to longer social, political, or economic trajectories that have framed Ethiopian, African, or even global history, and neither the student movement nor the revolution is analysed in terms of policy impacts or *continuities* with other African or third world countries [my emphasis].³⁴

By using the Black Radical Tradition as a theoretical framework then, my study takes up Elleni’s call to look at the ESM not through “personal redemption” (as someone born decades after the ESM, I couldn’t in a meaningful way even if I wanted to) neither in terms of “conflict between modernity and tradition,”³⁵ but rather as part of a larger African tradition of resistance that the breach of colonialism has simply made necessary.

³³ Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory*, 9.

³⁴ Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory*, 9.

³⁵ Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory*, 9

On the topic of education, others like Paulos Milkias have posited that the radicalization of the students came from the contradiction of a liberal education while the oppressive feudal system persisted:

When Western governments, especially the US, push for the implementation of a liberal education while supporting the maintenance of the feudal system for the purpose of perpetuating a dependent society, the outcome of this contradictory policy on Ethiopian students is none other than a characteristic disenchantment with liberalism and liberal values.³⁶

In essence, “Milkias argues that the political crisis of the 1960s and early 1970s was a reaction to the feudal, authoritarian regime, which introduced Western education and values without changing the intrinsic character pertaining to it.”³⁷ Like other works on the ESM, Milkias’ work has been criticized for its lack of explanatory power when it comes to how an educated elite, funded by Haile Selassie himself, turned on the imperial regime.³⁸ Understanding the ESM under the BRT is one way to see how through Marxism, the intelligentsia manages to resist the very society or government that provided them with such education and deal with how this further implicates themselves and their class. The literature analyzing the ESM, although recognizing the influence of external factors, has not yet made the explicit connection that the Ethiopian students, whether known to them or not, were maneuvering under the same pattern established by the longer tradition of Black radical resistance.

³⁶ Messay Kebede, review of *Haile Selassie, Western Education, and Political Revolution in Ethiopia*, by Paulos Milkias, *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3, no. 1, (2007): 130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27828883?seq=2>.

³⁷ Guluma Gameda, review of *Haile Selassie, Western Education, and Political Revolution in Ethiopia*, by Paulos Milkias, *Northeast African Studies* 10, no. 1, (2003): 192, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41931370>.

³⁸ Guluma Gameda, 195.

The most recent dissertation is by Amsale Alemu and her argument that the revolution in Ethiopia was realized by a “decolonizing politic.”³⁹ In other words, the students used language that described Ethiopia’s dependent relationship to the West using terms like imperialism and neo-colonialism. Amsale notes that it was “Ethiopia’s relationship to coloniality that was the subject of student critique.”⁴⁰ Ethiopian students were grappling with defining Ethiopia’s situation as an un-colonized country that was exhibiting signs of coloniality, while at the same time being unable to articulate a form of Ethiopia since they had “deep disputes over the modes of Ethiopian imperialism enacted against its subjects, and while [also being] moved by a sense of purpose energized by prophetic grandeur.”⁴¹ To encapsulate this state of flux, Amsale develops what she calls the “politics of the noncolonized” to underscore the “self-narrative of exceptionalism, founded on an insistent legacy of having resisted European colonial rule, but ultimately a signature of Ethiopian coloniality.”⁴² Amsale’s study is a significant addition to the historiography concerning the ESM because it troubles rubber-stamped notions of Ethiopian independence and contextualizes the student’s resistance within the backdrop of a special case of colonialism to which Ethiopia was victim. Thinking through “the politics of the noncolonized” as a symptom of Ethiopian coloniality against which the

³⁹ Amsale Alemu, “Revolution Beyond Redemption: U.S. Empire, Student Struggle, and Ethiopian Coloniality,” PhD diss., (Harvard University, 2021), 2.

⁴⁰ Amsale Alemu, “Revolution Beyond Redemption,” 5.

⁴¹ Amsale Alemu, 5.

⁴² Amsale Alemu, 6.

students were railing helps augment the BRT framing because perceived Ethiopian independence make such inquires challenging to articulate.

Bahru's concern with the historiography with the ESM is evident as there exists a not insignificant group of monographs and journal articles that have no love reserved for the ESM. Andargachew Tiruneh has argued that the ESM is nothing more than "an unwitting by-product of neo-colonialism"—something that was "swept off the ground" by "European ideologies and organizational models."⁴³ In examining the role of Marxism on Ethiopian students in North America, Tesfaye Demellash notes that their radicalism was of an intellectual nature, one more concerned with the "aspiration to disengage themselves from their feudal national tradition and link up with a progressive world culture of enlightenment, democracy, and socialism."⁴⁴ ESANA/ESUNA was then guilty of an "impatience with ideological mass work and an over-eagerness to be a protagonist in revolutionary struggle on behalf of the masses rather than with them."⁴⁵ In essence, Ethiopian students abroad, with the comfort and safety provided them by their physical distance from repression in Ethiopia, saw themselves as an example of Lenin's advanced vanguard contingent, best suited to lead the masses theoretically. While recognizing that Marxism, unlike any other "indigenous or foreign intellectual tradition" could offer the students "a different structural model of national development and an alternative

⁴³ Andargachew Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Revolution 1974-1987: A Transformation from an Aristocratic to a Totalitarian Autocracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 29.

⁴⁴ Tesfaye Demellash, "On Marxism and Ethiopian Student Radicalism in North America," *Monthly Review* 35, (1984), 3.

⁴⁵ Tesfaye Demellash, "On Marxism," 4.

conception of the good society,” Tesfaye maintains that members of ESANA/ESUNA were more prone to “the articulation of simplified truths, radical phrases emptied of conceptual content, agitational slogans, and action programs” rather than establishing and working with working people through mass organizations.⁴⁶

In a similar vein, Fasil Merawi argues that the ESM was riddled with elitism, instrumentalist Marxism that went hand-in-hand with the radical rejection of the Ethiopian past, and was generally “dominated by the attempt to emulate Western models of modernization as a foundation of societal progress.”⁴⁷ Moreover, Messay Kebede has argued that the student movement’s radicalism came from a “cultural dislocation induced by a Eurocentric educational system and the resultant infatuation with Marxism-Leninism.”⁴⁸ This is because the curriculum that the Ethiopian students were engaging with was one of American or British construction. Messay continues, however, “the detrimental structural legacies of Haile Selassie’s long reign do not fully explain the drift of the country into the path of radicalization and confrontation, since reformist and less oppositional solutions were available.”⁴⁹

That Marxism “at its epistemological substratum...is a Western construction” is of no question.⁵⁰ The problem arises when failing to acknowledge that despite this, for

⁴⁶ Tesfaye Demellash, “On Marxism,” 4.

⁴⁷ Fasil Merawi, “The rise and fall of Marxism in Ethiopia: a critical analysis of emancipatory paradigms,” *Critique* 52, no. 1 (2024): 95.

⁴⁸ Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation*, 7.

⁴⁹ Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation*, 7.

⁵⁰ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

many Black intellectuals, Marxism, among other forces, was a tool among the “path to discover[ing]” the Black Radical Tradition.⁵¹ This does not mean Marxism was an irrelevant or a superfluous step in the political journeys of Black radicals; rather, it was that Marxism was the most visible part of Western education and philosophy—of which they were largely exposed to because of colonialism and neo-colonialism—that attempted to vest the ultimate power within the oppressed worker, the producer of value. It was also a framework for critiquing Western imperialism, despite being a product of Western philosophy itself. It is hard to miss the way in which this formulation spoke to the reality of African people since the onset of colonial plunder.

It should also be noted that although the student movement explicitly adopts Marxism to articulate its politics and struggle, it was not the sole result of exposure to Western education. Before the student movement began to take on the dimensions it did in the height of the 1960s and early 1970s, Ethiopian students had long committed themselves to using their role in society for community service. Through the Ethiopian University Service in the late 1950s and early 1960s, students would visit orphanages, teach literacy classes, and even donate land for the construction of a school.⁵² This demonstrates that the students were concerned with the material wellbeing of the Ethiopian poor, and their role in transforming it, before they had the theoretical means to express and proselytize it through Marxism. The material conditions they saw the majority of Ethiopia were living under motivated them to resist the empire. Ultimately,

⁵¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Foreword,” *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xviii.

⁵² Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 91.

the driving force to the radicalization of the student movement was the objective immiserated socioeconomic conditions they eventually saw was the result of imperialism and feudalism.

However, that Western education is destructive to indigenous systems of epistemology and traditions is not a fact this study aims to challenge. Rather, it is to complicate the ways in which despite said destructive forces, African people have had the ability to resist the same system—not to save Western epistemology from itself because of the “betrayed legacy” to which these elites felt they were usurped, as Messay suggests⁵³—but rather to create a new system relevant to their respective goals as African people, with whatever tools at their disposal.⁵⁴ This is not to say that the scenario within which the foreign-educated elite act in this manner of collaboration did not happen. However, it is to assert that this does not explain the avowed revolutionaries like Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, Samora Machel, Thomas Sankara, and more who were far from interested in saving the West from itself. Moreover, the framework of cultural dislocation does not make room for those who were exposed to the reality that of Western society, be it through learning and living in the metropolises, only to develop a consciousness that resisted the very epistemes of said society and looked back to Africa with sentiments of socialist world-building; this is a consciousness that does not owe its ontological genesis solely, or decisively, to Western education.

⁵³ Messay Kebede, *Radicalism and Cultural Dislocation*, 43.

⁵⁴ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: PANAF, 1965), 32.

Further, chalking up the attraction of Marxism to a submission to foreign influences is an inadvertent synonymizing of all socialist thought and practice to Marxist theory. It is important to note that Marxist theory is only one expression of socialist thought and practice—one that Marxism does not have a monopoly on. More often than not, the rush to label Africans who deal with Marxist theory in anticolonial practice as victims of Eurocentrism is a disempowering critique that makes no room for the fact that Marxist theory was used to critique Western civilization itself, not endorse it or copy it wholesale for the African context.

In *The Anatomy of Neo-Colonialism in Kenya*, Maloba examines this same tendency in the ideological split represented by Jomo Kenyatta (who turned out to be conservative, despite his earlier radicalism) and Oginga Odinga, representative of the radical Kenya People's Union. The decline of radicalism in post-*Uhuru* Kenyan politics was ushered in by the concerted effort, on the part of the Kenya African National Union government and British intelligence, to discredit Marxism and Communism—concepts that were deemed un-African because of the notion that class struggle did not exist in Africa.⁵⁵ Anyone espousing such ideas then was acting on foreign influence, devoid of African culture and spirituality.⁵⁶

That this was a tactic used to defang and delegitimize radical politics during the struggle against Western imperialism should not be overlooked, especially when such tactics were executed in the midst of the Cold War. The ideological battle between

⁵⁵ W.O Maloba, *The Anatomy of Neo-Colonialism in Kenya* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 79.

⁵⁶ Abdul Rahman Mohamed Babu, *African Socialism or Socialist Africa?* (London Zed Press, 1981), 55.

Western capitalism and communism was a hotbed for the demonization of any liberation struggle that espoused socialism. Hence, rather than falling into this same trap, this radical consciousness must be seen in context with the rise of Pan-Africanism across the continent. This critique does not deal with the fact that while utilizing Marxist frameworks for their intellectual production and ideological development, the Ethiopian students were increasingly growing Pan-African. Any chance they got they declared solidarity with other anti-colonial struggles taking place against Europeans, while using Marxism to identify that it is the same European imperialism that perpetuates the colonial economic relationship of African countries, and makes a puppet of Haile Selassie, the leader of a supposedly independent African nation. Would not this cross-continental link they were forging have been hampered or prevented by something as Eurocentric as Marxism?

Moreover, a useful framework of thinking about this phenomenon is the differences between an educated elite and a revolutionary elite.⁵⁷ In his “Weapon of Theory” chapter of *Unity and Struggle*, Amilcar Cabral discusses at length about the inevitable role that the African petty bourgeoisie must play in partly leading the national liberation struggle. He notes that, “the only social stratum capable both of having consciousness in the first place of the reality of imperialist domination and of handling the State apparatus inherited from that domination is the native petty bourgeoisie.”⁵⁸ This is not because of any inherent deficiency in the colonized population outside this class; rather, it is a

⁵⁷ W.O. Maloba, *Revolution This Time: Toward a New Africa* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2024).

⁵⁸ Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 135.

question of the resources and mechanisms available to a group of people determined by class. Cabral explains:

By virtue of its objective and subjective position (higher standard of living than that of the masses, more frequent humiliation, higher grade of education and political culture, etc.) [the petty bourgeoisie] is the stratum that soonest becomes aware of the need to rid itself of foreign domination. This historical responsibility is assumed by the sector of the petty bourgeoisie that, in the colonial context, one might call revolutionary, while the other sectors retain the characteristic hesitation of this class or ally themselves to the colonialist so as to defend, albeit illusorily their social position.⁵⁹

Here, Cabral takes care to note that members of the petty bourgeoisie, by the liminal privileges allotted to them, experience (because of humiliation and proximity to the real ruling class) a distinct degree of political consciousness than the lower classes. This is the same trend Robinson identifies among what he terms the Black radicals, those who turned their “face to the historical tradition of Black liberation,” and whose intellectual production and brilliance was derived from “the midst of the people of whom they wrote.”⁶⁰ Members of the petty bourgeoisie then are met with the option to “ally themselves to the colonialist” or to commit “suicide as a class, to be restored to life in the condition of a revolutionary worker completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which he belongs.”⁶¹ Cabral and Robinson, through different phraseology, offer a framework to understand how the African petty bourgeoisie is either able to completely sell out to the colonial order and identity or to re-Africanize oneself by committing class suicide and aligning oneself with the masses of working Africans who

⁵⁹ Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, 135.

⁶⁰ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 184.

⁶¹ Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, 136.

themselves may not be equipped with the education to articulate and lead a national liberation struggle—but certainly have the consciousness to resist colonial and neo-colonial rule. Hence, this thesis maintains that becoming a revolutionary elite was where the students were headed. Though the movement’s history was cut short because of repression in the late 1970s, the students were beginning to show signs of becoming a fully-fledged revolutionary elite.⁶² One that as W.O. Maloba defines it, espouses “education for liberation.”⁶³

However, that the revolutionary elite is now able to articulate the ideologies a liberation struggle is not an end unto itself. However necessary, only articulation and historicization is not sufficient to realize the tangible goals of a national liberation struggle. Cabral notes, “Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits.”⁶⁴ The revolutionary elite, like other sectors of society (workers, farmers, artists, etc.) play a crucial role in the radical reordering of a society. This role, however, is distinguished by turning whatever capacity and benefits their position might allow over to the revolution. Hence, the revolutionary elite’s work must be in the furtherance of the material benefits to be won once revolution is indeed on the horizon. As Cabral put it, these are the

⁶² This is further addressed in “The Black intelligentsia as the Revolutionary Elite” section of this thesis.

⁶³ W.O. Maloba, *Revolution This Time*, 213.

⁶⁴ Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea: An African People’s Struggle* (London: Love & Malcomson Limited, 1969), 69.

material benefits that allow the exploited “to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children.”⁶⁵

This is helpful in thinking through the ways in which university students in Ethiopia, despite being members of the upper class, were, partly through education, able to understand the true nature of the Ethiopian social order and chose the route of class suicide to mitigate what they saw as the empire feudal and imperialist tendencies. They were able to call for “Land to the Tiller” not because they happened to own land directly but because they understood that raising the standard of living for all Ethiopians necessarily involved the land question. They asked, “Is Poverty a Crime?” not because they were sincerely confused, but because they saw the oppression of the poor within the capital as a policy of Haile Selassie’s empire that they likened to a concentration camp.

When thinking about socialism and Africa, it is often forgotten that Marxism is just one expression of socialist thought⁶⁶ that is neither the catalyst for socialisms outside Europe nor is it universal (despite its best efforts). Part of this investigation is not to necessarily completely discount the argument that Marxism was of European construction and so destined to fail in Ethiopia, but rather to offer an alternative perspective that complicates such assertions. Though criticizing the ESM has its uses in garnering the historical lesson from which current Ethiopian youths can learn, the total rejection of the struggles of the Ethiopian youth of the mid-century is partaking in the same break and rejection of the Ethiopian past the students themselves were accused of.

⁶⁵ Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea*, 69.

⁶⁶ Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 16.

As world citizens and active agents in shapers of the future, the students and their radicalism at the very least must be examined from the perspective that recognizes that agency. Was everywhere Marxist theory taking root outside of Germany and Europe a moment of cultural dislocation? Is this criticism strictly reserved for Ethiopian students since radicalism is “un-Ethiopian”? Or do we need to complicate this position by investigating Marxism’s prevalence, rather than domination, among non-Westerners despite its clear Western origin.

1.5 What is a Black, radical tradition?

The notion that there can be something radical and remain a tradition is a contradictory labeling since “radical” connotes an antagonism to a tradition—an established order of things. David Scott raises this in his 2013 essay “On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition,” and maintains that despite the contradiction of such a label, there is a need to or “demand for some notion of a tradition that is black and radical.”⁶⁷ That there is “some stubborn grain against which to position our dissent, a recognition perhaps that even in our attempts to disengage from the claims of tradition we are nevertheless oriented by it.”⁶⁸ Scott makes use of Alasdair McIntyre’s arguments about what constitutes a tradition: “a socially embodied and historically extended discursive terrain on which the identity of a community is argued out.”⁶⁹ Under this framework, it

⁶⁷ David Scott, “On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition,” *Small Axe* 40, (March 2013): 2.

⁶⁸ David Scott, “On the Very Idea,” 2.

⁶⁹ David Scott, “On the Very Idea,” 3.

would be erroneous to view tradition in its popular iteration as an affirmation of the establishment and embrasure of conservatism. However, to situate a Black radical consciousness that is simultaneously traditional, Scott offers a definition of tradition as a “contentious dramatic narrative that seeks to make a connection, through a distinctive temporal style of reasoning, between pasts, presents, and futures, and between identity and community.”⁷⁰ In this sense, the Black Radical Tradition is and can be a tradition made up of different “conflicts of interpretation” but still highlight or emphasize the shared history of an ever-present past.

This brings us to the Black Radical Tradition as offered by Cedric Robinson in his magnum opus, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Here, Robinson is engaged with what Lewis Gordon aptly called Caliban studies, “thinking through the periphery, the underside, the subaltern,”⁷¹ to provide a perspective that is “nothing less than a call for a new history, a central task of which is to emphasise the role of those in the black diaspora as subjects and not merely objects.”⁷² This approach was necessary to begin to understand Black radicalism without limiting the very idea of radicalism to a Eurocentric reactionary genesis. It was because of this orientation that a systematized study of the phenomenon that is a BRT was identified and put forward in academia and popular discourse. *Black Marxism* is not a “greatest hits list” of all the Black Marxists, nor does it aim to amend aspects of Marxism to speak to the plights of

⁷⁰ David Scott, “On the Very Idea,” 3.

⁷¹ Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

⁷² Kofi Buenor Hadjor, review of *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, by Cedric Robinson, *Race and Class* 42, no. 4, (2001): 2.

Black people.⁷³ Rather, Robinson aims to “map the historical and intellectual contours of the encounter of Marxism and Black Radicalism”—frameworks he identifies as “programs for revolutionary change.”⁷⁴ Besides this herculean task, that some argue Robinson attempted but did not achieve at least within the confines of this text, at hand is judging whether Marxism and Black radicalism are “incommensurable.” Does the latter spring forth from the former? Is Marxism an appropriate metric with which to measure the political orientation of Black radicalism and its ontological justification? In essence, what is the dialectical relationship between Marxism and Black radicalism?

To tackle the questions and map out the meetings, departures, and nuances of Marxism and Black radicalism, Robinson reconstructs the appearance of “racial sensibilities in Western civilization.” Robinson then enumerates its “social and ideological consequences” and then outlines the rise and nature of Black radicalism in resistance to those racial sensibilities. Robinson argues that racialization played an important, if not a central, role in “the developmental, organization, and expansion of capitalist society” and “social ideology.”⁷⁵ Robinson makes the case that racialization was a Western method of social organization “through which peoples of these ages came to understand their worlds and their experiences.”⁷⁶ It was not necessarily constructed after non-Europeans were forced into the world capitalist system as colonized. As Western civilization expanded outwards, this internal, socially codified system of

⁷³ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Foreword,” *Black Marxism*, xviii.

⁷⁴ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 1.

⁷⁵ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

⁷⁶ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 66.

organization came along with it. Black radicalism, then, its roots and potentiality, was present preceding and succeeding this outward expansion—rather than an unmitigated reaction against Europe or as a product of the tumultuous 1960s as it is popularly understood to be.

Robinson does not ascribe to the idea that the Atlantic slave trade completely destroyed every aspect of African traditions and cultures—that these people were “tabula rasa,” an empty slate with no identity of their own. Robinson writes:

Marx had not realized fully that the cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality...African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements on consciousness and comprehension.⁷⁷

This is not an original argument since Melville J. Herskovits’ 1941 *The Myth of the Negro Past* had established the continuity of African cultures within the Americas.

However, what Robinson is adding to this is how a revolutionary culture—one that was not just the preservation of African cultures—but one that was antagonistic to European exploitation also developed.

These African cross-cultural admixtures played a significant role in the revolutionary consciousness required for radical resistance. If these Africans truly were an empty slate, why choose death over a life of bondage with the belief that one’s spirit returns home? Why not unequivocally embrace the colonizing culture, even when seduced by a watered-down version of its comforts? For Robinson, it was as African men and women, that these people managed to resist.⁷⁸ This does not mean that African

⁷⁷ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 21-2.

⁷⁸ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 309.

cultural diffusion is the strict prerequisite for radicalism, but rather culture or a preserved way of life itself.⁷⁹ In this way, Robinson espouses Cabral's argument that "it is generally within the cultural factor that we find the germ of challenge which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement."⁸⁰ These were then the "terms upon which the response of the enslaved to the slave system would be grounded."⁸¹ A culturally-rooted history of Black radicalism, however, was not recognized by "Western radicalism" (read: Marxism). This obfuscation of Black radicalism stems from the "West's suppression of Europe's previous knowledge of the African (and its own) past."⁸² Black radicalism doesn't owe its genesis as a negation of Western capitalist society. Rather, "other revolutionary forces," (ones overlooked by Marx and Engels in their construction of a "European proletariat...as *the* revolutionary subject of history") emerged, "informed as they were by the ideas and cultures drawn from their own historical experiences."⁸³

Robinson explicates his gripes with Marxism for 1) overlooking Black radical resistance as a phenomenon separate from Western notions of radical revolt; 2) over-emphasizing the economic base and relegating race and culture to the superstructure that stems from said base; 3) for perceiving itself as the universal arbiter of radical working-

⁷⁹ Cedric Robinson writes, "It was not simply a question of outrage or concern for Black survival. It was a matter of comprehensions. The outrage, I believe, was most certainly informed by the Africanity of our consciousness—some epistemological measure culturally embedded in our minds that deemed that the racial capitalism we have been witness was an unacceptable standard of human conduct" (30).

⁸⁰ Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, 143.

⁸¹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 122.

⁸² Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 3

⁸³ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 4

class sensibilities; and 4) for “displac[ing] socialism historically” by “placing its ideological, social, and material origins from the earliest recorded history to the ‘era of capitalism.’”⁸⁴ However, Robinson does not dismiss Marxism altogether; he simply warns against the unabashed and unheeding use of it in the name of combatting racial capitalist oppression and exploitation. Robinson further outlines the limitation of Marxism by dedicating the latter half of his book to the three giants of the Black radical intelligentsia of the 20th century—W.E.B. DuBois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright—and showing how each encountered Marxist theory and sooner or later saw its limitations.

Robinson’s account, one that has been called “revisionist history,” has been challenged on multiple fronts: the simplification and straw-man critiques of Marxism^{85,86}, and the insufficient proving of the “non-European sources of black resistance,”⁸⁷ at least within the body of *Black Marxism*. Despite these genuine concerns, Robinson’s magnum opus establishes a useful, systematized look at the BRT from which various points of departure have the potential to stem. Robinson never meant to exhaust the BRT within the confines of *Black Marxism*, but to “only suggest that it was there.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ The latter argument is from Robinson’s *An Anthropology of Marxism* on page 151, but is demonstrative of other issues that Robinson had with Marxism that were not mentioned in *Black Marxism*.

⁸⁵ Gregory Meyerson, “Rethinking Black Marxism: Reflection on Cedric Robinson and Others,” *Cultural Logic* 6, (2000): 30.

⁸⁶ Joseph G. Ramsey, “Sifting the ‘Stony Soil’ of Black Marxism: Cedric Robinson, Richard Wright, and Ellipses of the Black Radical Tradition,” *Socialism and Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2020): 7.

⁸⁷ Cornel West, review of *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, by Cedric Robinson, *Monthly Review* 40, no. 4, (Spring 1988): 2.

⁸⁸ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, iii.

1.6 Key Pillars of the Black Radical Tradition

This study then picks up where Robinson leaves off in these capacities: 1) deepening the BRT's existence within Africa and 2) exploring student and youth radicalism through the BRT. Throughout *Black Marxism*, and particularly in the chapter, "The Nature of the Black Radical Tradition," Robinson identifies key aspects that define the BRT: 1) the absence of mass violence; 2) a revolutionary consciousness stemming from an African past; 3) resistance motivated by "only the promise of liberation"; and 4) the role of the Black intelligentsia. Robinson argues that the absence of mass violence when looking at Black radicalism is symptomatic of the fight to preserve "the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social, or psychic senses."⁸⁹ This is not to say no violence was used but rather to emphasize that it was with the basis of an "African tradition" that Black people within and without the continent were waging different resistance and liberatory movements. This is where the concerns of attributing this lack of violence, or at least the "level of violence that they (the Westerners) understood the situation required," to an Africanity and the violence of Western civilization to being Western, potentially rises.

Though these concerns are valid, this study proposes that in addition to the lack of mass violence, recognizing those instances, however sparse, as revolutionary violence: a violence that Fanon argues is "a cleansing force...emboldens...[and] restores...self-confidence."⁹⁰ This is the kind of violence not enacted for the sake of it but a

⁸⁹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 168.

⁹⁰ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 51.

manifestation of radical measures taken to combat the oppressions of colonialism, while at the same time vesting within the colonized the empowerment to transform their material conditions. Though the students later embrace revolutionary violence, the aspect more pertinent to this query is what Robinson argues is a revolutionary consciousness stemming from the African self.

Though Robinson does not go into detail about the “ontological totality” or what I interpret as the African self in which this radical consciousness is nurtured, it is best interpreted that this outward manifestation of such a consciousness can show up in various ways considering the diversity of the African experience. In the Ethiopian students’ case, this can be evident in that despite breaking with the Ethiopian past in some respects, the students also referred to a people’s history of resistance of which they felt inheritors and embraced Pan-Africanism. This troubles some of the more common critiques of the students regarding their rejection of the Ethiopian past and their dismissal of it as a medieval phenomenon—useless for their task in socialist worldbuilding.

Another aspect of Black radicalism under the BRT is what Robinson identifies as “a kind of resistance that does not promise triumph or victory at the end, only liberation.”⁹¹ This is a departure from how even Marxian thought can be seen espousing a Christian-esque sense of salvation with the inevitability and promise of a utopian world in which workers have finally seized the means of production and class and class struggle have been eradicated. Contradistinctively, the realism Robinson attributes to Black radicalism is grounded in the notion that resistance is not propelled by a utopian destination. This is an aspect also worth exploring in the ESM and how the students

⁹¹ Robin D.G. Kelley, “Foreword,” *Black Marxism*, xxvii.

visualized their resistance because many of the criticisms levelled against them, and criticisms of student movements in general, are that these movements are utopian dreams not grounded in reality—either because of their radicality or their youth.

The final and most pertinent characteristic of the BRT is the role of the Black intelligentsia and how their social class orientates them in a way that makes them both marginal beneficiaries of a social order that simultaneously oppresses them and the masses of their race or nationality. However, it is this contradiction, “as descendants of the enslaved, [as] victims of racial domination, and [as] tools of empire [that] compelled some of these men and women to rebel.”⁹² The students of the ESM possessed a similar class contradiction. One where they enjoyed higher education, within and without the borders of Ethiopia, with the blessing and patronization of Haile Selassie himself. However, it was not too long before these same students turned their ire against Haile Selassie, his absolutism, and the feudal and imperial order they saw his regime perpetuating and benefitting from; while the workers and farmers were dealing with non-stop famines and droughts that made living outside Addis Ababa a waking nightmare. The espousal of Marxism, the tool they used to articulate their grievance and resistance to the imperial regime, was seen as a result of a cultural dislocation.⁹³

⁹² Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xiv.

⁹³ The cultural dislocation thesis partly from the question raised by Messay Kebede about why the students chose such a radical path toward redressing their issues with the government when reformist and centrist path were available to them? Would it not have been more realistic to work with Haile Selassie to affect the progressive changes they wanted? This line of inquiry comes from the idea that everyday Ethiopians, no less Ethiopian students, could take on something as absolutist and immovable as Haile Selassie’s regime and his collusion with colonizers. The rational thing to do would have been to be reformist not revolutionary. And hence, how could they think they could topple him were they not poisoned by European Marxism. This is in addition to the

The object of this inquiry is more concerned with the notion that for many Black radicals, Marxian theory played an important role in facilitating the development of radical consciousness that Black people were already capable of. Though Bahru argues that Ethiopian students partly adopted a Marxist-Leninist line because it served as a “ready-made justification for [their] militant opposition,”⁹⁴ this study is more concerned with how the attempts at making Marxist theory relevant to the Ethiopian situation were indicative of genuine practice that later came to be dominated by the dogmatism that it is regrettably only known for.

This understanding of a Black radical history, one that precedes Western iterations and makes use of it after its encounter, makes room for a radical consciousness that is not a result of “cultural dislocation,” nor one that owes its ontological justification to Europe. A similar argument can be made for the development of radicalism among the students of the ESM. Their witnessing of the oppression of the working class and peasantry under Haile Selassie’s government and their identification with revolutionaries who took direct action against this government are instances worth exploring as inheritors and practitioners of the Black Radical Tradition in the Horn of Africa.

1.7 Chapter Outline

The succeeding chapter will explore the economic, political, and cultural milieu of Ethiopia that backdropped the events of Ethiopian students beginning to collectivize and

relative powerlessness of the students who were indeed going to school because Haile Selassie opened it. Hence, they could have no way of winning and toppling his regime when Haile Selassie was Ethiopia and Ethiopia was him.

⁹⁴ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 138.

express their discontent with the government. The latter half of this chapter discusses what the students made of these various contexts and what theoretical framework and ideological underpinnings governed their thinking. At this point, students were reacting to the strict and stifling environment that the government created on campus; an environment where a real exchange of ideas was not encouraged among the students. To understand the overall shift to direct insults and challenges to the government, be it clandestinely or in the open, a re-creation of both the tangible and discursive influences of Ethiopia is necessary. This entails the policies of Haile Selassie's government on campus, as well as its policies regarding the organization of the many ethnic groups within the country. This chapter will also situate the ESM in the context of Cold War politics and the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement. How did an African consciousness permeate the Ethiopian psyche in the early years of the movement? And how did this consciousness inform the ways in which they waged resistance? What did the students make of the policies of Haile Selassie domestically and internationally?

The Ethiopian economy, in terms of class relations, in the early sixties and leading up to the early seventies is best, though not perfectly characterized, as a feudal order in which farmlands were tended by farmers but not directly owned. The students sought to make sense of and classify the class system in Ethiopia. Who benefits from what? Why is wealth accumulated at the top? Why is poverty a ubiquitous force with no mitigative actions in sight? And, as students, what role did they play, even though, "In the stratified Ethiopian social hierarchy the student youth is placed at the bottom of the

ladder.”⁹⁵ The students sought to answer how the “uneven nature of the relationship between the ‘exploited’ and the ‘imperialist’ countries” ⁹⁶ impacted the lowly Ethiopian farmer and further alienated him from land and labor.

Further, the cultural and intellectual context will entail a discussion of the Ethiopian Church’s role in the arts and how that produced works that affirmed rather than challenged the status quo. As the students become radicalized, they began to question the role of art as a form of political device and break from their intellectual reformist predecessors (what Bahru Zewde calls the “Pioneers of Change”) that further raises the political consciousness of Ethiopian people. By situating the ESM within the political, economic and cultural context, in three magnitudes of order (the global, continental, and Ethiopian) this chapter will outline the various forces at play in the development of the ESM.

The third chapter will discuss the radicalization of students and their growing affinity with Marxist theory. This chapter will explore the ideological underpinnings of their thoughts and how Marxism was utilized in the context of Ethiopia. The fourth chapter will then discuss how this consciousness impacted the conclusions students drew in the realm of the national and ethnic question and what role ethnicity played in their definition of change. The final chapter will synthesize the Ethiopian students’ iteration of black radicalism: What are the differences/pitfalls of black radicalism in the context of the ESM? Were the students happy to identify as radicals as an end unto itself without

⁹⁵ Fentahun Tiruneh, *The Ethiopian Students: Their Struggle to Articulate the Ethiopian Revolution* (Chicago: Nyala Publishing, 1990), 1.

⁹⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 132.

instituting material change? Did they want to act more materially but felt it futile so never did? In other words, were they active agents that embodied revolutionary consciousness in thought and action or armchair revolutionaries simply “shouting or...slinging insults, spoken or written,”⁹⁷ against the empire?

This thesis seeks to approach the ESM holistically and empathetically in a way that recognizes it as an iteration of a Black and African tradition of radical resistance. It is continuity over disruption. It is ontologically and phenomenologically African rather than an offshoot and poor imitation of European radicalism. I stress this point because Ethiopian exceptionalism within and without academia permeates the way Ethiopia and her history are studied. We forget that the Horn of Africa is still indeed in Africa. We forget that Ethiopians indeed are Africans. And how they resist is necessarily informed by that Africanity. This is what the Black Radical Tradition helps reinstate in this and further inquiries on Ethiopian history.

⁹⁷ Amílcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, 121.

Chapter 2

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

“You keep on saying ‘Ethiopia, Ethiopia.’ Ethiopia is nothing without me. Her fate is intertwined with mine. Don’t imagine that Ethiopia will survive after I am gone.”⁹⁸

- Haile Selassie I

Though Haile Selassie I is now remembered for reigning over a moment where Ethiopia was relatively peaceful and modernizing through the establishment of the University in Addis Ababa, he, like many absolutists, was heavily “preoccupied [with] the acquisition and preservation of political power.” Bahru notes that “it was a matter of obsessive concern for him”⁹⁹ and that his progressivism was really a front for political clout. Haile Selassie reigned over an Ethiopia whose land and taxation policies were brutal and exploitative for the peasantry—while also taking power away from the nobility to strengthen the central government. Through the Provincial Administration Decree of 1943 and two other imperial orders in the same year, Haile Selassie was able to

⁹⁸ Bahru Zewde, “Hayla-Sellase: From Progressive to Reactionary,” *Northeast African* 2, no. 2 (1995): 110, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41931205>.

⁹⁹ Bahru Zewde, “Hayla-Sellase: From Progressive to Reactionary,” 101.

concentrate power and weaken the periphery—the power of the regional nobilities. Land and land-based taxation were in turn a way for Haile Selassie to fund his power consolidation efforts and his notion of “modern Ethiopianism.”¹⁰⁰ It should be noted that between “The period 1963/64-1971/72, tax revenues represented more than 87% of total government revenues”¹⁰¹—making taxation a significant pressure point of Ethiopia’s journey to revolution. In the cultural sphere, Haile Selassie built relationships and funded intellectuals and cultural workers in the bid for building a modern Ethiopia of his image.

Ethiopia under Haile Selassie in post-liberation years (after the expulsion of the Italians in 1941), was an agrarian society that was scaffolded by Ethiopia’s rigid class system. Haile Selassie was the god-like figure that was the “pinnacle,” then came the wealthy landowners (who collected taxes on behalf of the nobility), then the professional middle class, and finally, the peasants and laborers who were “The majority of the population...[and] also occupied the lowest socioeconomic strata.”¹⁰² As such, “agriculture engage[d] more than 80% percent of the population, and accounted for about 60% of the gross domestic product in the 1960s.”¹⁰³ International revenue from exports were also dependent upon coffee—and to some extent still is. This agrarian society made the ownership of land and its taxation a central and intertwined components of Ethiopia’s

¹⁰⁰ *Selected Speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I* (USA: One Drop Books, 2000), xi.

¹⁰¹ Eshetu Chole, “Towards a History of the Fiscal Policy of the Pre-Revolutionary Ethiopian State: 1941-74,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 17, (1984): 88.

¹⁰² Getahun Worku Tadesse, “Social stratification in Ethiopia from ancient to present: historical perspective,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1, (2024): 7.

¹⁰³ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002), 191.

road to modernization. For example, the 1942 “Proclamation to Provide for a Tax on Land” was the first attempt of Haile Selassie’s regime to introduce a flat-rate payments of taxes in cash¹⁰⁴ in addition to the tithe introduced by Menelik II in 1892.¹⁰⁵ By 1944, however, this was followed by the “tax in lieu of tithe” law which “required landowners to pay tax instead of tithe.”¹⁰⁶ These attempts at taxing the landed gentry, however, were unsuccessful since they would evade or shift the burden to the tenant.

Privatization of land also meant the growth of the tenant-landlord system and even policies that made inviolable the rights of the landed gentry.¹⁰⁷ The complex land ownership system in Ethiopia is best understood through the two dominant systems, the *rist* and *gult*. The former was “ownership of land invariably heritable but as a general rule unsalable” and the latter was land “tribute given in recompense for service, military or administrative,” generally not heritable.¹⁰⁸ Both were, however, leveraged to expand the power and influence of the central government. Through *gult*, “the government made extensive land grants from its large reserve, which came under the conveniently vague rubric of government land.”¹⁰⁹ Un-inheritable land became a commodity that the government could leverage to implant support where needed. Bahru notes that Haile

¹⁰⁴ Peter Schwab, “The Tax System of Ethiopia,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 29, no. 1, (1970): 79.

¹⁰⁵ Bahru Zewde, “Economic origins of the absolutist state in Ethiopia (1916-1935),” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 17, (1984): 15.

¹⁰⁶ Eshetu Chole, “Towards a History,” 93.

¹⁰⁷ Bahru Zewde, “Hayla-Sellase: From Progressive to Reactionary,” 108.

¹⁰⁸ Bahru Zewde, “Economic origins of the absolutist state,” 12.

¹⁰⁹ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 191.

Selassie had the habit of raising those from humble beginnings to the heights of leadership—under the assumption that the ensuing gratitude would be an assurance of loyalty. Furthermore, by emitting edicts that prevented the seizure of land as a punishment for crime and instead instituting “bodily or financial”¹¹⁰ punishment, Haile Selassie was able to garner praise from both the domestic and international fronts for its beneficence to both the government and the nobility.

What is evident, however, was that the peasantry who tended the land, as in those who made the land profitable, were largely the ones that suffered the most. While Haile Selassie levied taxes that were meant for the landed gentry, the nobility would shift the burden to the tenants.¹¹¹ The government introduced new taxes like the Health Tax and the Education Tax but allocated only 2% toward agriculture in its 1967 budget, for example. In this way, the working peasantry in Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia became the means through which the emperor and the nobility at large maintained their lifestyle and the means through which a “modern Ethiopia” was imposed in a way that benefitted the bourgeoisie. This economic organization complemented the political scene where Haile Selassie’s godly image, and his goals of Ethiopian modernization and power consolidation were juxtaposed by British and American paternalism.

2.1 The Political Context

Haile Selassie’s domestic policies are best understood by the notion of modern Ethiopianism—modernizing Ethiopia’s industry and culture after the Western model with

¹¹⁰ Bahru Zewde, “Economic origins of the absolutist state,” 12.

¹¹¹ Eshetu Chole, “Towards a History,” 94.

the caveat that ultimate power is vested within him, a notion that is at this point quite démodé in most parts of the Western world. Haile-Selassie's power centralization before even formally inheriting the throne entailed making use of the intellectual class by using them to challenge the more traditional nobility. Even this class, however, was stratified in terms of favor with the emperor as Haile Selassie was more likely to prefer the domestically educated Ethiopians as opposed to those who learned abroad. With the elimination of unruly regional leaders and the creation of a bourgeois bloc loyal to the emperor, Haile Selassie was playing the delicate game of both curbing those wealthy enough to wield influence and install those loyal to him in positions of power.

Augmenting the optics of Addis Ababa, the capital, through architectural grandeur,¹¹² was also another way Haile Selassie built an image of a modernized Ethiopia that hid the true reality of the poverty-stricken peasantry. The architecture of 1950s Addis Ababa reflected the modern yet regal aesthetic that Haile Selassie sought to achieve.¹¹³ Perhaps the greater oxymoron is that Haile Selassie recruited Italians, among other foreigners, to lay the foundations of buildings in an Ethiopia that is presumably free from colonial domination and influence.¹¹⁴

Though Haile Selassie managed to create an image of infallibility as the emperor of one of the oldest Christian civilizations in Africa, his ability to govern autonomously

¹¹² Rebecca Martin Nagy, "Continuity and Change: Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists," *African Arts* 40, no. 2, (Summer 2007): 72.

¹¹³ Ayala Levin, "Haile Selassie's Imperial Modernity: Expatriate Architects and the Shaping of Addis Ababa," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 75, no. 4 (2016): 448.

¹¹⁴ Ayala Levin, "Haile Selassie's Imperial Modernity," 450.

were at first greatly impaired in the immediate years after liberation. The expulsion of the Italians in 1941 gave way to a “unilateral British domination.”¹¹⁵ With the 1942 agreement with Britain, Haile Selassie signed away what should have been powers vested within his office.¹¹⁶ Britain’s dominion over Ethiopian finances, military, police, overall “administration and territorial integrity,”¹¹⁷ angered the emperor and he was only too glad to begin building ties with the new superpower in town, the United States—in a historical moment Bahru Zewde calls, “The American Era.” The Ethio-US Treaty of 1953 “defined the relationship between the two countries in the following decades,”¹¹⁸ where the U.S. assisted Ethiopian military through the Military Assistance Advisory Group and, amazingly, “by 1970, Ethiopia had come to absorb some 60% of US military aid to the whole of Africa.”¹¹⁹

Though institutions like the military, education, public works, and Ethiopian Airlines were established with the help of the Americans, and sometimes direct control (as with the case of Ethiopian Airlines), these upgrades did not garner “a marked improvement in the quality and standard of life” for the average Ethiopian.¹²⁰ Suffice it

¹¹⁵ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 179.

¹¹⁶ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 179: “...the provision for mutual diplomatic accreditation was qualified by the stipulation that the British minister in Ethiopia would enjoy precedence over all other diplomatic representatives to the country. British subjects occupied key posts in Ethiopian administration, as advisers and judges; further, the entire police force was run by the British.”

¹¹⁷ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 179.

¹¹⁸ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 185.

¹¹⁹ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 186.

¹²⁰ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 42.

to say that Ethiopia's internal administration was deeply influenced and controlled by Western direction. It was to the point that the 1955 Constitution was itself drafted by Americans—espousing and imbuing what should be the document that embodies Ethiopia's multi-national ethic and aspirations with those of the United States'. In the midst of a catalogue of the oxymoronic traits of Haile Selassie (both modern and ancient; a democracy and an absolutist monarchy; Ethiopian autonomy and foreign influence), the educated elite of Haile Selassie I University (later to be UCAA), arguably the product of his modernization efforts, became the same ones that identified the infinitely contradictory nature of Haile Selassie's rule—and, in due time, actively organized against it.

2.2 The Cultural Context

The cultural scene was also not safe from Haile Selassie's modernization efforts. If anything, art and cultural productions played a complementing role in the overall modernization effort that colored Haile Selassie's rule in the post-liberation period. The establishment of the School of Fine Arts in 1958 was inaugurated by the hope that Ethiopian works of arts could "make Ethiopia known more widely as a nation fully participating in the spirit and the substance of modern civilization."¹²¹ As per Haile Selassie's philosophy of modernism, however, he also used "pageantry and performance, architecture, art, and symbolism to reinforce his image as both a divinely anointed dynastic ruler and an enlightened champion of political and social reform."¹²² For Haile

¹²¹ *Selected Speeches*, 51.

¹²² Rebecca Martin Nagy, "Continuity and Change," 72.

Selassie, modernity was not the establishment of a Western-style secular government that brought with it a system of checks and balances ensuring power was not concentrated within a single position or branch of government. Haile Selassie wanted the best of both worlds: a Western-style modern democracy that reinforced his reign as the Conquering Lion of Judah, the King of Kings, the Elect of God, and Defender of the Faith. In fact, one condition of his reinstatement to the throne once the Italians were expelled from Ethiopia in 1941 was that he takes measures to establish a constitutional monarchy; a “promise he reneged on” once established in power.¹²³ Though the cultural scene became another way to strike this balance of absolutism and modernism, the inherently discursive nature of art made it the place where political discontent could be shrouded in the effusive haze of meanings that art necessarily evokes. This explains why students would later use poetry to air their grievances in the earlier days of the movement.

2.3 The Intellectual Context

The Ethiopian educated elite in the early years of Haile Selassie’s comeuppance, in the first half of the twentieth century, were both friend and foe to his regime, early theorizers on modernization, and the predecessors to the educated elite found in the students of the latter half of the twentieth century. A survey of the Ethiopian intellectual tradition at this time reveals certain individuals whose ideas on administration, governance, and political economy—ideas that were most pertinent to the state-building and consolidating project of Haile Selassie’s government—were both a source of

¹²³ B. Kifle Selassie, “Class struggle or jockeying for position? A review of Ethiopian student movements from 1900 to 1975,” in *The role of African student movements in the political and social evolution of Africa from 1900 to 1975*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 164.

inspiration and the site of antagonisms. One such example was the scholar Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, who was born in the Tigray region of Ethiopia but was later raised in Germany where he attended medical school in Berlin.¹²⁴ Though he studied medicine, his preoccupation upon returning to Ethiopia was grappling with the question of modernization and how leaders could implement policies to that end. His experiences abroad had made him cognizant of the reality of the backwardness of the Ethiopian polity; a backwardness he prescribed education. He writes:

If a nation had no knowledge, it is immaterial whether it has an independent state or not, for it is bound to be ruled by a people with knowledge ... It is because they have knowledge that many Europeans come to Ethiopia in a state of poverty but manage to prosper in no time and end up having Ethiopians as their servants.¹²⁵

Gebrehiwot's thoughts on the role of foreign influence are not easily categorized as either for or against. To be sure, he was quite against colonialism and direct foreign control as it pertains to Ethiopia. However, he did see European ways of administration as not only exemplars for Ethiopia but the balm and prophylactic to the backwardness that seem to shackle her development. He continues, "Whoever opens his door to her [i.e. European mind] prospers; whoever closes his door will be destroyed. If our Ethiopia accepts European mind, no one would dare attack her; if not, she will disintegrate and be enslaved."¹²⁶

Historians since have noted that Gebrehiwot was not necessarily a victim of Eurocentrism in a strict sense, but rather a proponent of the indigenization of Western

¹²⁴ Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002), 50.

¹²⁵ Bahru Zewde, *Pioneers of Change*, 112.

¹²⁶ Bahru, *Pioneers of Change*, 110.

forms, as applicable to the governance of Ethiopia.¹²⁷ Japan, was an example; Gebrehiwot writes, “Hence, let us hope that His Highness Menilek’s heir would examine and follow the example of the Japanese government.”¹²⁸ However, the example and temptation of foreign rule was evident among other intellectuals as well. Tekle Hawariat Tekle Mariyam, another intellectual who backed the Japan model mused:

Sometimes, I ask myself, would it have been better if the civilized nations had colonized us for a short period of time? The British had that opportunity twice...But, because they were not prepared to help, they left the country without setting up anything.¹²⁹

This was echoed by the likes of Afework Gebreyesus and Workneh Eshete as well, but with the understanding that foreign rule would jumpstart the modernization process rather than allow colonization in perpetuity. These are the same intellectuals that jealously guarded Ethiopian independence and exhibited a mistrust of foreigners, to the point they were seen as xenophobic by foreigners.¹³⁰

What these nuanced positions on Ethiopian independence and modernization point to is the philosophy of gradual reform that the empire of Ethiopia could implement—rather than doing away with the imperial form of government itself and starting from scratch. These intellectuals wanted to work with whatever leader was in power, affirm his rule, and suggest ways that Ethiopia could be like the West without threatening the power of the central government. This they did while identifying that the

¹²⁷ Endalegeta Kebede, “ኢትዮጵያ ካፈራቻቸው፣ ዘመናቸውንም ከቀደሙ ምሁራን አንዱ! (ቆይታ ከፕሮፌሰር አለማየሁ ገዳ ጋር),” YouTube, December 27, 2024, video.

¹²⁸ Bahru, *Pioneers*, 110.

¹²⁹ Baru, *Pioneers*, 100.

¹³⁰ Bahru, *Pioneers*, 106.

true wealth of the country was agriculture and the labor value of the peasantry.¹³¹ This same sector of the educated elite also criticized the decadence of its own class, and highlighted how the further emaciation of the peasantry and the enrichment of the nobility could only further erode any patriotic feeling that might be espoused by the peasantry; that is, to the detriment of the empire at large:

Someone deprived of the basic necessities of food and clothing has no reason to love his country; he cares little whether his state prospers or perishes. Thus, the state stands to lose if national wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, and to gain if it is distributed equitably.¹³²

The educated elite at this juncture of Ethiopian history, what Bahru Zewde terms the “First Generation,” though preoccupied with the modernization and generally changing the organization of Ethiopia, did not want to get rid of the same regime that won the Battle of Adwa in 1896. They saw what could be accomplished when the various regional lords of Ethiopia set aside their quarrels at the face of the existential threat in the form of the Italian invasion. Hence, they sought to use both foreign and domestic means of development as long as it was on Ethiopia’s terms, preferably sooner than later.

The students of the 1960s inherited the same questions regarding the best way to govern Ethiopia, the role of land, and the role of both the working poor and the peasantry in realizing an Ethiopia that is not only independent in name but in practice as well. Though their intellectual predecessors answered some of these questions, their inability to

¹³¹ On page 115 of *Pioneers of Change*, Bahru notes that Gebrehiwot argued that “The real basis of national wealth is agriculture.” Similarly, on page 123, Bahru notes that Afework writes, “The basis of development and national wealth is agriculture. All the rest is subsidiary.”

¹³² Bahru, *Pioneers*, 120.

part with the imperial government, and worse, refraining from condemning all forms of foreign rule, became something the students could not look past. It is for this reason and many others, that the students were accused of breaking with Ethiopian pasts, and failing to unearth the gem from what they saw was the gunk of reformism that so occupied the intellectuals of the early century.

Chapter 3

MARXIST THEORY AND ETHIOPIAN ECONOMICS

“In a world where the constituents of civilization are literacy rates, per capita income, life expectancy, etc., can we simply hope that our three thousand-years old civilization will someday suddenly of its own convert itself into a twentieth-century civilization?”¹³³

- *Challenge* Editorial Board

“The fact that the emperor made no allowance for even moderate opposition meant that opposition could manifest itself only in radical form.”¹³⁴

- Bahru Zewde

The 1960s and the era of anti-colonial struggle show that Marxism was embraced by many people whose national history has been defined by colonialism and imperialism. The rise of the New Left, the concomitant internationalization of the Civil Rights Movements and the Black Power Movement, and the fiery liberation movements sweeping across Africa did not fail to politically awaken the Ethiopian students at home or abroad. These movements, coupled with the socioeconomic situation at home, was the perfect recipe for students to begin to espouse and apply the radical means of challenging

¹³³ Editorial, *Challenge* 5, no. 1 (1965): 1.

¹³⁴ Bahru Zewde, “Hayla-Sellase: From Progressive to Reactionary,” 110.

authority that Marxism offered. By using the students' own words on their various publications, with concomitant historical events, this chapter will track how Marxism played a role in the students' formulations of the political and economic situation in Ethiopia, and where they met and departed from their intellectual predecessors in the conclusions they drew and the solutions they offered.

The 1960 coup d'état attempt by the Neway brothers was the first visible crack in the fabric of Ethiopian society that left an important mark on the psyche of the Ethiopian Student Movement. Though the coup failed, leaders were executed, and students were reprimanded for siding with the coup-makers, it did not pass without humanizing the grandeur that was Haile Selassie's regime. Tesfaye Dinka notes that the failed coup "fed into growing criticism and even open opposition from various constituencies" especially after taking note of the "regime's vulnerability to pressure from [the armed forces] constituency."¹³⁵ In agreement, Bahru Zewde notes that the 1960 coup was "an important backdrop to the radicalization of the Ethiopian Student Movement."¹³⁶

3.1 Land Reform

The Ethiopian students both at home and abroad were writing tracts exploring the economic conditions of Ethiopia as well as organizing demonstrations and protests that were in open opposition to the imperial regime. One of many subjects that concerned the students' writings was land. Land reform was both a topic for intellectual inquiry and a

¹³⁵ Tesfaye Dinka, *Ethiopia during the Derg years: An Inside Account* (Los Angeles: Tsehai, 2016): 16.

¹³⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 71.

rally cry under the slogan “Land to the Tiller!” After two student leaders riled up a group of assembled students on the Haile Selassie I University campus, students took to the streets on February 25, 1965—marching “first to the parliament, where they submitted a petition, and then across the city.”¹³⁷ Though “spectators were struck with amazement,” as the students marched yelling “Land, land, land to the tiller,” nothing tangible came out of this demonstration—other than the university students being reprimanded for missing classes. Despite this however, this protest marked “the final moment of rupture, ushering a series of demonstrations and rallies and ultimately leading to the adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology.”¹³⁸ In this way the central question of land, concurrent with the aggravations the imperial government imposed on students, was a significant mobilizing role for students internationally.

A month after the “Land to the Tiller!” demonstration, in the March 1965 issue of *Challenge*, Hagos Gebreyesus, leader of ESANA/ESUNA, writes an article that voices the cynical mood about the question of land reform, titled “Land Reform: Plus ça change...?”¹³⁹ This article demonstrates the students’ disillusionment with the regime; it is argued that trusting the imperial regime and bourgeois parliament to implement land reform—an act that will necessarily contradict their class interest—is a romantic and delusional idea; that parliament pats itself on the back for any action taken that alleviates the condition of the peasantry—even if said action falls woefully short. Hagos writes:

¹³⁷ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 120.

¹³⁸ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 101.

¹³⁹ The full phrase in French is “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,” which roughly translates to “the more it changes, the more it stays the same.”

Every single historic inequity is now enshrined in the law of the nation...it is [argued that] the adoption of a uniform code of law is a great step forward...One example is...that the rent in kind of a tenant shall in no cases exceed 75% of the crop! Bravo! Ethiopia is now a land of law! Yet we maintain that the frenzied applause of the Court sycophants is drowned by the groans of the oppressed and exploited peasantry, who has only increased their misery by devouring the crumbs of false hope scattered by reformers.¹⁴⁰

Though this impassioned, however sarcastic, tract may be dismissed because of said passion, an earnest reading of the article also reveals the extent of the discontented mood with which students were engaging with their government. One of the questions and critiques posed about the ESM was its resistance to reformism and failing to seek moderate, non-radical means to air their grievances with the emperor. Though this was tried and failed by their intellectual predecessors, the “pioneers of change,” the students themselves addressed this question more directly. Hagos Gebre Yesus continues, “Given *this* information [the corruption of parliament, the deaf ears of the government, and overall conditions of Ethiopia’s poor], would we call for revisions in the Code or for a thorough housecleaning in the palaces of injustice?”¹⁴¹

Impassioned tracts such as these, nevertheless backed by facts, were followed up by more solid Marxist analyses that used empirical studies on Ethiopian land and agriculture to call for the dire need of radical change. Bahru notes that throughout the early ‘70s, the question of land was taken up in earnest despite retroactive critiques of the contrary. For example in the July 1970 issue of *Challenge*, Dessalegn Rahmato wrote “Conditions of the Ethiopian Peasantry” where he identifies two modes of production

¹⁴⁰ Hagos Gebreyesus, “Land Reform: Plus ça change...?” *Challenge* 5, no. 1 (1965): 5.

¹⁴¹ Hagos Gebreyesus, “Land Reform,” 7.

(feudal and commercial agriculture) and three classes (the landed aristocracy, the local gentry and the peasantry.)¹⁴² Dessalegn posits that Ethiopia has a feudal system¹⁴³ that is much like Europe: much like the European serf who had no right to the surplus value he created, the Ethiopian farmer faced the same fate through tenancy rent, taxes, and church obligations.¹⁴⁴ Dessalegn concludes that instead of reformist or “facile measures; as a better regulatory environment or grants from government-owned land,”¹⁴⁵ a more radical systemic change needed to occur. Another study by Eshetu Chole, “The Mode of Production in Ethiopia and the Realities thereof,” from the November 1971 issue of *Challenge* also sums up thus: “The dominant mode of production in Ethiopia is feudalism existing side by side with an embryonic capitalism that has...little prospect of development.”¹⁴⁶

The question of dealing with land reform was also undertaken with the role of the Orthodox Church in mind. In the March 1965 issue of *Challenge*, an article titled “Unveiling the Paradox” notes how the Church, in conjunction with the imperial regime, hardens the already hardened lives of the peasantry. The author, Belay Kassa (of whom the article makes sure to point out is “brought up in an Orthodox family and is an

¹⁴² Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 126.

¹⁴³ The intersection between feudalism and imperialism the students identified and argued against as the primary contradiction in Ethiopian society is taken up in the latter part of this chapter in the section “Imperialism and Feudalism.”

¹⁴⁴ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 126.

¹⁴⁵ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 126.

¹⁴⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 126.

adherent of that sect of Christianity”¹⁴⁷) writes that the Church is “a partner of oppression.” Because of the many “Saints’ days, religious feasts, and Sabbaths” that the Church imposes, the farmer misses out on many days of productivity and works for “about two hundred days a year on average.”¹⁴⁸ Adding to this the excessive fasting (160 days out of the year) and the “many expensive traditional Church feasts that are demanded of the farmer,” a nonsecular source from which the deeply impoverished conditions of the farmer becomes further aggravated was identified.

3.2 Class Relations

Though ESANA/ESUNA in the early 1960s was not explicitly using Marxist frameworks by name in their analysis, the conclusions they drew and arguments they made were certainly inspired by it—especially in their class analysis. In the March 1965 issue of *Challenge*, the organ of ESANA/ESUNA, the editorial article makes a call for a much-needed reordering of Ethiopian society and values—one that does not function at the base exploitation of the majority of Ethiopians. It also exudes a notable level of class anxiety; ESANA/ESUNA writes that the Ethiopian youth’s “history is not one of real concern for Ethiopia but a record of extreme individualistic egoism, opportunism and despair.” And that its failure in espousing “genuine nationalism” has made it blind to the fact that “The real issues of Ethiopia are absolutely different from (or opposed to) the

¹⁴⁷ Belay Kassa, “Unveiling the Paradox,” *Challenge* 5, no. 1 (1965): 14.

¹⁴⁸ Belay Kassa, “Unveiling,” 15.

practices of high-class marriages and an unending series of bureaucratic titles.”¹⁴⁹ In the August 1967 issue of *Challenge*, they write:

True to their class origins, these men [educated elites], despite all their rhetorical pretensions to radicalism and revolutionism, became, to an extent unknown elsewhere, the most faithful servants of a fundamentally archaic and obsolete regime...they were forging a new and dangerous coalition between the older ruling elements and themselves.¹⁵⁰

Members of ESANA/ESUNA show an understanding of class antagonisms that have been evident to the intelligentsia of the past, while essentially predicting the conditions that would lead to some sort of rupture: “This state of affairs cannot go on indefinitely. It might not be too long before the silent millions begin to demand a share in the better life we are so selfishly monopolizing.”¹⁵¹ This is the same consciousness Cedric Robinson notes within the Black intelligentsia of the African diaspora at large; that it was [as potential] tools of empire [that] compelled some of these men and women to rebel.”¹⁵² As the only educated sector of the Ethiopian population, there was concern of once more perpetuating the same vicious cycle they saw as detrimental to the true growth of Ethiopia’s poor peasantry:

We...prefer to believe that the issue involved a choice between the welfare of the deprived majority of Ethiopians and the welfare of a small minority, between ourselves becoming additional problems, between a desire to save one’s soul by finding within the vicious circle and a desire to break the circle. If by idealism is also meant having ideas, we believe it is more rational to have ideas than not.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Editorial, *Challenge* 5, no. 1 (1965): 2.

¹⁵⁰ “Editorial: Beyond an Ideology of Powerlessness,” *Challenge* VII, no. 1 (1967): 4.

¹⁵¹ Editorial, *Challenge* 5, no. 1 (1965): 2.

¹⁵² Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xiv.

¹⁵³ Editorial, *Challenge* 5, no. 1 (1965): 3.

Though Marx is not cited in their analysis of the alienation of labor, in this same issue of *Challenge*, Hagos Gebre Yesus employs it to bemoan “The fact that the peasant works not for *himself*, but for *other* [and] the fact that this *other* appropriates (essentially by force) everything...what is required for bare subsistence.”¹⁵⁴

These class tensions, through the lack of appropriate land reform and punishing taxation, bubbled over in the attempted 1960 coup d’etat led by the brothers Neway. Brigadier Mengistu Neway and his brother Germame Neway, joined with key figures like “Asfawasan, who was to be the future salaried constitutional monarch of Ethiopia, [and] was made the mouth-piece of the rebels,”¹⁵⁵ to declare a new government. However, this new government would retain leaders within the current regime but do away with the monarchy as it currently stood. Though they did not deal explicitly with the question of land reform, they “promise[d] to [establish] new factories and schools” as well as to restore “Ethiopia to its former glory.”¹⁵⁶ Though this coup ultimately failed to dethrone Haile Selassie and establish a government without monarchy, it nevertheless revealed the extent of discontent the armed forces were feeling toward the regime. This discontent also spread to impact those who occupied the lowest rung of society: the landless peasantry.

Peasant rebellions were another way these class antagonisms were beginning to rupture. The 1940s saw two peasant uprisings in the northern Tigre province, the Woyane

¹⁵⁴ Hagos Gebreyesus, “Land Reform,” 4.

¹⁵⁵ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 213.

¹⁵⁶ Bahru Zewde, *A History*, 213.

Peasant rebellion of 1943, and one in the south, the Yajju uprising in 1948. The 1960s opened with the Gedeo uprising and continued with the Bale uprising of 1963, a peasant rebellion that was inspired by Somali irredentism, and closed with the Gojjam uprising of 1968. The pacification of these rebellions by the government only managed to delay what the lack in structural changes eventually led to: revolution.

The attempted coup d'état and the multiple peasant rebellions in the midcentury was for the students a mobilizing force that affirmed their struggle against Haile Selassie's government. As students within the capital, they undoubtedly had a more intimate relationship with the emperor. He was known to visit campuses, take photos with students, and hand out merit awards on occasion.¹⁵⁷ He was also a parent-figure who would levy edicts when his children had outbursts that disrupted the peace.¹⁵⁸ That their activism was met with repression was among one of the ways they felt the totalitarianism of the emperor's rule; however, the conditions of Ethiopian workers and, most of all, the peasantry was the radicalizing force.

In their January 1971 report *Repression in Ethiopia*, the students reflect on these peasant uprisings and summarize their role in furthering the popular struggles against the regime. They write:

This state of intensified oppression and exploitation has given rise to a national uprising of workers, peasants, students and other progressive elements...The Ethiopian Student Movement is in the forefront of these struggles. Students are waging the struggle under the banner of Land to the Tiller and Anti-Imperialism.

¹⁵⁷ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 103.

¹⁵⁸ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 104.

The goal has become the building of a new Ethiopia based on a complete social transformation of the society.¹⁵⁹

It is because of the conditions of the peasantry and their disappointment with their own class, the educated elite, that in the August 1966 issue of *Challenge*, ESM members declared that “we have chosen to throw our lot with the oppressed masses of Ethiopia and we still stand by our choice until the people have triumphed.”¹⁶⁰ They understood that their role as students must be to stand “in the forefront of these struggles.”¹⁶¹ In other words, supporters if not inheritors of the agitation against the empire. By the early 70s, the students’ language and position on the empowerment of the peasantry took on new dimensions and were further emphasized in political discourse. Though the movement is criticized for breaking with Ethiopian history in their struggle against Haile Selassie, there were moments where patriotic sentiments that called on Ethiopian history were used to emphasize the wrongs the imperial regime has committed.

In *Repression in Ethiopia*, the students continue, “The Ethiopian masses who have made heroic sacrifices to safeguard the nation’s independence have become subject to the most oppressive internal domination.”¹⁶² In the December 1972 issue of *The Call*, an ESANA/ESUNA member submits an article summarizing the resolutions of the

¹⁵⁹ The Ethiopian Students Union in North America, “Repression in Ethiopia,” *Africa Research Group* 5, (1971), 8.

¹⁶⁰ “The Spirit of Solidarity,” *Challenge* VI, no. 1 (1966), 3.

¹⁶¹ “Repression in Ethiopia,” *Africa Research Group* 5, (1971), 8.

¹⁶² The Ethiopian Students Union in North America, “Repression in Ethiopia,” *Africa Research Group* 5, (1971), 1.

Ethiopian Students 20th Congress in which the same theme of affirming the efforts of the lower classes while condemning Haile Selassie's regime is continued:

Evidence abounds that the fierce and unflinching resistance of the Ethiopian masses to Portuguese, British, French and Italian colonialism for more than five centuries has been compromised by the autocratic regime of Haile Selassie. Ethiopia today, as in the past two decades, is the most stable neo-colony of U.S. imperialism.¹⁶³

3.3 Imperialism and Feudalism

What set the Ethiopian students apart from other strains of applied Marxism is what they saw as the marriage of feudalism and imperialism (or neo-colonialism) in the Ethiopian context. The years succeeding the "Land to the Tiller!" demonstration marked a shift in the political consciousness of students—one that took on the anti-imperialist and ant-feudalist rhetoric and orientation. It has also been noted that the students frequently referred to the history of Ethiopia's courageous victory over Italy to decry the policies of Haile Selassie's regime. However, they did this to also emphasize how despite that seemingly decisive victory, Ethiopia's economic and hence political administrations were deeply influenced by foreign powers: "The regime has threatened the long-cherished independence of Ethiopia (and Africa in general) by turning its soil into a military base of neo-colonialism. Foreign elements have an absolute monopoly over our educational and cultural life."¹⁶⁴

Bahru Zewde notes that the students made solid attempts at analyzing the extent to which the U.S. had penetrated Ethiopia in the militaristic, cultural, and educational

¹⁶³ "Ethiopian Students Hold 20th Congress," *The Call* (Los Angeles, CA), Dec. 1972, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/call/call-1-3.pdf>.

¹⁶⁴ "The Spirit of Solidarity," *Challenge* VI, no. 1 (1966), 1.

spheres; however, their lack of identifying the economic means through which the U.S. directed Ethiopian affairs was a “general weak point of student writing on US imperialism.”¹⁶⁵ There were, however, still attempts at closing this analytical gap:

U.S. firms are involved, among other things, in potash and petroleum exploration, spice extraction, ceramic tile and paper manufacture and hotel industries. To facilitate the penetration of U.S. imperialism, the puppet regime has enacted special laws protecting U.S. firms against expropriation, and has provided “generous” duty-free and tax exemption provisions. These policies have placed fetters on genuine national economic development while ensuring the U.S. monopolists’ super profits, cheap labor and unlimited access to the mineral and natural wealth of the country.¹⁶⁶

The history and contemporary impacts of American imperialism on Ethiopia was explored by the students in their January 1971 issue of *Challenge*. All the articles featured were dedicated to understanding the global context of European and American imperialism, and how it manifested in Ethiopia.¹⁶⁷ For example, the first article, the editorial piece, opens with an acknowledgement of how Ethiopia’s retained independence, despite its veracity, has been a propagandic tool for the ruling regime “to provide historical legitimacy for its continued rule and [to] acquire a propaganda cover for the neo-colonization of the country.”¹⁶⁸ This meant that the regime affirmed itself with the victorious Battle of Adwa, and convinced the people of its “unflinching

¹⁶⁵ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 133.

¹⁶⁶ “Ethiopian Students Hold 20th Congress,” *The Call* (Los Angeles, CA), Dec. 1972, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/call/call-1-3.pdf>.

¹⁶⁷ Some articles featured were titled “Notes on European Imperialism in Ethiopia” by Aklog Birara and “Origins of American imperialism in Ethiopia” by Wondwossen Hailr, and a longer study titled “Imperialism in Ethiopia Today” by the New York Chapter of ESUNA.

¹⁶⁸ “Editorial: Imperialism and National Liberation,” *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1971): 1.

patriotism and dedication to sovereignty,” while selling out “the country to imperialism.”¹⁶⁹ This understanding provided the basis for their declaration that “The question of national liberation is intimately tied to the problem of imperialism,”¹⁷⁰ and the need to do some house-cleaning within the movement since “there are a number of people within the movement who do not see a clear-cut antagonism between our movement and imperialism.”¹⁷¹

For the students, American imperialist designs on Ethiopia went back to 1903 with the Skinner Mission. This mission also marked “America’s entry into competition over Ethiopia [with] England, France, and Italy.”¹⁷² In his “Origins of American Imperialism,” essay in the January 1971 issue of *Challenge*, Wondwossen Hailu cites Robert Skinner himself on the objectives of the mission in Ethiopia:

To investigate and report upon the trade possibilities of Ethiopia, to safeguard our existing interest by the negotiation of a commercial treaty—those were the motives which had prompted the organization of the American mission, and concerning our policy we had nothing more to disclose, and nothing whatever to conceal.¹⁷³

Though Lenin is not cited in this formulation, that international competition was what fueled imperialist designs, much like in the rest of Africa, was a conclusion Wondwossen

¹⁶⁹ “Editorial: Imperialism and National Liberation,” *Challenge* XI, 1.

¹⁷⁰ “Editorial: Imperialism and National Liberation,” *Challenge* XI, 2.

¹⁷¹ “Editorial: Imperialism and National Liberation,” *Challenge* XI, 2.

¹⁷² Wondwossen Hailu, “Origins of American Imperialism,” *Challenge* XI, no.1 (1971): 13.

¹⁷³ Wondwossen Hailu, “Origins of American Imperialism,” *Challenge* XI, 12.

drew and supported by historical examples.¹⁷⁴ Early twentieth century Ethiopia was marked by a power struggle over which European powers would take this particular slice of the great African cake, and Haile Selassie was all too willing to hand Ethiopia over to American indirect rule or neo-colonization than Italy's:

America's entry into the picture had accelerated the competition among the colonial powers and prompted Italy to take steps to pre-empt the others. Haile Selassie, who comprehended more fully the difference between American neo-colonialism and Italian colonialism, urged Washington to establish closer and higher diplomatic representation in Ethiopia.

Bahru notes that an "Objective examination of the situation at the time shows that US capital had scarcely penetrated the Ethiopia economy,"¹⁷⁵ and hence the students could not cite such data to make their point of American imperialism specifically within the boundaries of the economic front. However, there are still more examples in attempts to address this. In 1971, the students note that the mineral deposits within Ethiopia, particularly potash in the Danakil Depression "caught the interest of American businessmen as early as 1949." The students note that by 1967, "the [Ralph M. Pearson company's] total investment had reached US \$200 million by 1967," and subsequent policies had provided "an annual growth rate of 25% in the mining industry."¹⁷⁶ The philosophy governing their logic was also the inseparability of the political to that of the economic. In the August 1967 issue of *Challenge*, the editorial article reads: "They [the Ethiopian bourgeoisie] decided to align Ethiopia fully with international imperialism by

¹⁷⁴ Wondwossen Hailu, "Origins," *Challenge* XI, 19.

¹⁷⁵ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 133.

¹⁷⁶ "Imperialism in Ethiopia Today," *Challenge* XI, no.1 (1971), 26.

providing it with a direct military base on Ethiopia's soil and opening virtually every avenue of our national life to its indoctrination and guidance."¹⁷⁷

If one is to restrict the definition of imperialism to that of the economic front, then one could indeed argue that the students' anti-American sentiments were exaggerated and were a product of their dogmatic espousal of Marxism. However, the capaciousness of imperialism proves otherwise since cultural, political, educational, and militaristic American imperialism were ubiquitous and did not translate to the improvement of the standard of living of Ethiopians. The students were attempting to understand the somewhat contradictory and discursive nature of Ethiopia's independence and autonomy by utilizing both imperialism and neo-colonialism as conceptual tools for analysis.

Kwame Nkrumah's 1965 book *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* popularized this term among the African intelligentsia—and Ethiopian students were no exception. In the August 1967 issue of *Challenge*, Dessalegn Rahmato wrote a book review of *Neo-colonialism*, praising it for its ability to reveal the "complex mechanism of neo-colonialism as it operates in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East," yet criticizing it for not dealing with the "relationship between the ruling classes in the Third World and those in the imperialist countries,"¹⁷⁸ and suggesting that Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* should be read in conjunction to fill this analytical gap. This not only demonstrates the students' view of the fate of Ethiopia as intertwined with those who have been colonized whether in Africa or elsewhere, but also their sensitivity to the role of the national bourgeoisie and

¹⁷⁷ "Editorial: Beyond an Ideology of Powerlessness," *Challenge* VII, 5.

¹⁷⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Book Review," *Challenge* VII, no. 1 (1967): 33.

the intelligentsia in their potentiality of colluding with imperialist powers to facilitate the neo-colonial mechanism.

In the case of Ethiopia, this neo-colonial and imperial order manifested itself through the ways that the surplus value producing farmer's labor—of which the Ethiopian ruling class pockets and consumes (but does not reinvest in a way that would make it totally capitalist)—termed feudalism, is sold to foreign nations in a way that benefits all but the peasantry. This is why the students noted that planning in a feudal order is futile—since the working logic of the system necessitates the extraction of surplus value in ways that does not empower the farmer:

The planners were either unconscious of the prevailing conditions—viz., the existing feudal structure of the economy, the reduction of the country to a neocolonial state, the nature and purpose of the political forces at work serving these interests—or were simply foolhardy in setting their goals.¹⁷⁹

Unlike Marx, the students at one point in Ethiopian history saw the positive side of the feudal order in which farmer and landlord shared the same fate and were likely to have an amicable relationship. In citing the July 1969 issue of *Tataq*, the Amharic publication of ESUE, Bahru notes:

The landlord, who used to partake of the joys and sorrows of the peasant, has distanced himself once he had come to acquire new tastes through exposure to foreign (i.e. imperialist) influence; only the colour of his skin still united him with the peasant. Imperialism itself has been milking the country dry through the fictitious formula of 'the comparative cost theory', whereby developing countries like Ethiopia will produce raw materials and the developed world would produce manufactured goods.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ G.B., "The Futility of Planning in a Feudal Society," *Challenge* VII, no. 1 (1967): 22.

¹⁸⁰ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 133.

The feudal order, once allied with foreign capital (imperialism), turned into a system whereby the farmer, to which Ethiopia's economic output owes the most, is locked into producing goods at prices set by the whims of international demand. This in tandem with ever-increasing taxes and tithes, coupled with the notion of comparative advantage where the "division of labour...only resulted in a growing imbalance of trade in favour of the industrial countries."¹⁸¹

Ethiopia's coffee dependence was no secret. A study published in 2002, in part sponsored by the World Bank, reported that "Agriculture accounts for around 60% of Ethiopian GDP. Coffee is the most important export earner and accounts for between 60% and 70% of total export revenues."¹⁸² This dependence suggests that if the international price on coffee were to decrease or farmers could not produce the amount of coffee needed to maintain income, Ethiopia's economy at large, and of course the farmer, would take an unmitigated hit. To diversify the export portfolio in a way that would truly aid in the industrialization of Ethiopia was not possible under what the students saw as this double whammy of feudalism and imperialism.

The students noted this in the second article of their January 1971 issue of *Challenge*: "Ethiopia's most important export commodity which accounts for 60% of the total export value is coffee. That the export trade is based on a single primary commodity is characteristic of a highly underdeveloped economy." This 22-page exploration of

¹⁸¹ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 133.

¹⁸² "ICO/CFC Study of Marketing and Trading Policies and Systems in Selected Coffee Producing Countries: Country Profile Ethiopia," *Common Fund for Commodities/International Coffee Organization/The World Bank*, 2000.

imperialism in Ethiopia, including sections dealing with the economic aspects, military and political aspects, and the educational and cultural aspects, concluded:

1) Ethiopia today is in the grip of international finance and international imperialism; 2) the domination of the economy by foreign capital results in serious exploitation of resources and profound misdirection in the deployment of the country's potential; 3) there is symbiotic interdependence between imperialism and the present social system in Ethiopia.¹⁸³

Prepared by the New York Chapter of ESUNA, this study provided a telescopic view of the extent to which foreign capital had penetrated Ethiopia in their own time. One aspect of neo-colonialism they identified was the import and export relationship that Ethiopia was locked into with the West. They write:

Like all neo-colonial countries which are dumping grounds for goods, a substantial part of which are luxury goods unrelated to the objective needs of these countries, Ethiopia invariably imports more than it exports. For example, between 1963 and 1966, while imports increased by E\$128.2. million, exports only grew by only E\$54.6 million.¹⁸⁴

The students saw that the case of Ethiopia was much like other colonized African countries, but they were able to apply a nuanced analysis that took note of the convergence of interest between imperialism and feudalism that was for the most part unique to the Ethiopian situation. The same forms of neo-colonial exploitation took place whether it be through foreign aid, foreign trade, or foreign capital¹⁸⁵ but it manifested differently in Ethiopia, and hence made it more difficult to apprehend because of the way the social system the imperial regime instituted facilitated this process.

¹⁸³ New York ESUNA, "Imperialism in Ethiopia Today," *Challenge* XI, no.1 (1971), 33.

¹⁸⁴ New York ESUNA, "Imperialism in Ethiopia Today," 30.

¹⁸⁵ New York ESUNA, "Imperialism in Ethiopia Today," 25-31.

3.4 Pan-Africanism and the Role of the Ethiopian Student

The development of the students' Pan-African consciousness can be tracked back to when scholarship students from other African countries came to the campus in Addis Ababa under Haile Selassie's program. As early as 1960, a *News & Views* article noted:

By bringing out more clearly the situations and student problems of other parts of Africa, the efforts students make to overcome the various difficulties, handicaps and hindrances, will, there is no doubt, furnish us with criteria by which we can appraise our own progress.¹⁸⁶

This was largely spurred by the coming of other African students from Kenya, Ghana, Tanganyika, and more. This was followed by events on campus that increasingly took on a Pan-African dimension.¹⁸⁷ As such, tragedies taking place across the continent were cause for real concern among students who would organize demonstrations and marches in protest against the Sharpeville Massacre, the murder of Patrice Lumumba, and the "beating to death of African prisoners in the British colony of Nyasaland,"¹⁸⁸ and more. These were students who were increasingly seeing themselves as not only Ethiopians but African people, as well. More profoundly, as African people facing the same enemy in the form of Western imperialism.

By the time the student movement began to espouse Marxism more explicitly, this Pan-African consciousness had not eroded. It was rather intensified as they increasingly saw the situation in Ethiopia as inseparable from the situation of the rest of Africa and declared solidarity with other revolutionary movements. In their August 1966 issue of

¹⁸⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 104.

¹⁸⁷ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 104.

¹⁸⁸ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 105.

Challenge they write, “[ESANA] recognizes and welcomes the fact that the youth of our generation in Ethiopia, Africa, and elsewhere, is engaged in the struggle for independence and against all forces of domination.”¹⁸⁹ This sentiment continues as shown in the proceedings and resolutions of ESANA’s 15th Annual Congress in 1967. They resolve that “ESANA’s immediate task is to hasten the hour of the revolution;”¹⁹⁰ and with that comes working “in solidarity with African and international student organizations and movements in the struggle for world-wide freedom and peace.”¹⁹¹ They also declare solidarity with the rebellion of Black people in the U.S., writing “ESANA declares its solidarity with all the progressive forces in the black community engaged in revolutionary struggle for liberation.”¹⁹²

The students’ reading lists were also getting more and more Pan-African in scope. In 1969, among their selected bibliography in their Political Education Program were included *The Colonizer & The Colonized* by Albert Memmi, *Mau Mau from Within* by Don Barnett Hales and Karari Njama, *The Black Jacobins* by C.L.R James, *History of the Russian Revolution* by Leon Trotsky, and more.¹⁹³ Their Political Education Program is

¹⁸⁹ “Resolutions,” *Challenge* VI, no. 1 (1966): 4.

¹⁹⁰ Proceedings and Resolutions of the 15th Annual Congress of Ethiopian Student Association in North America held from August 25-31, 1967, in Bloomington, Indiana, 17.

¹⁹¹ Proceedings and Resolutions of the 15th Annual Congress of Ethiopian Student Association in North America held from August 25-31, 1967, in Bloomington, Indiana, 7.

¹⁹² Proceedings & Resolutions of the ESANA 15th Annual Congress, 17.

¹⁹³ ESUNA, *Selected Bibliography for Political Education Program*, August 1969, 1-3.

demonstrative of their understanding of how their struggle was part of this more global power struggle against Western imperialism.

Other than their critique of Haile Selassie's empire using Marxist frameworks, what separates the students from the early 20th century intellectuals was the solutions they offered to the same societal malaise both groups of intellectuals identified. This was manifest in their explicit alliance with the peasantry and worker population of Ethiopia. The students chafed at once being intellectuals whose role was nothing more than benefitting from the same regime they were relentlessly critiquing:

[ESANA] solemnly declares that henceforth it will cease to be a disjointed social club of unconcerned "intellectuals;" it sets for itself the honorable task of championing the aspirations, needs and demands of the vast majority of the Ethiopian people as well as the asp[i]rations of the wronged millions of other countries whose needs and demands originate from fundamentally similar causes.¹⁹⁴

These articles demonstrate the realization of class consciousness and attempts at understanding their role as a newly awakened vanguard for change. Sometimes they explicitly articulated it:

Students have a significant role in ushering in the Revolution. Because of the objective limitations to which they are exposed, students cannot, however, carry out the revolution by themselves...Their task [is] acting as the ignition, the initial spark that will generate the revolutionary fire...they constitute the vanguard of the revolutionary movement.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ "The Spirit of Solidarity," *Challenge* VI, no. 1 (1966): 4.

¹⁹⁵ Proceedings and Resolutions of the Sixteenth Annual Congress of Ethiopian Student Union in North America held from August 29 to September 2 1968, in New Haven, Connecticut.

It has also been argued that these articles were “serious attempts to go into the fundamentals of the situation that gave rise to the call of ‘Land to the Tiller.’”¹⁹⁶ They were earnest attempts to reveal the lived reality of the majority of Ethiopians in a global context. And more than that, it was also an expression of the BRT because they were able to do this through their discovery and apprehension of Marxist frameworks. Cedric Robinson notes that one of the many expressions of the Black Radical Tradition is how the learned men and women of the African diaspora encountered Marxist thought and made use of it in their liberation struggles. Though the ESM was accused of using Marxism cosmetically,¹⁹⁷ there were real attempts that challenge such assertions. There is no doubt that with the students’ radicalization came the abandonment and breaking with Ethiopian history that they felt was not useful for revolutionizing Ethiopian society. The history of Ethiopia, largely the history of monarchs and conquest as opposed to the people, was, far from a tool of empowerment, seen as a mistake that need not be repeated. This necessarily came with it the rejection of art and cultural works that again, if not pertinent to radical change, were not worth the time. A good example is the article Dessalegn wrote in the March 1965 issue of *Challenge* deeply critiquing the artwork of one of the most celebrated artists of his time, Afewerk Tekle.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 126.

¹⁹⁷ In his “On Marxism and the Ethiopian Student Movement” essay, Tesfaye Demellash writes, “the reduction of Marxist theoretical discourse within the union to the articulation of simplified truths, radical phrases emptied of conceptual content, agitational slogans, and action programs.”

¹⁹⁸ In his article “Art Betrayed,” Dessalegn theorizes about the role of art in society and critiques how Ethiopian artists contemporary to his time, particularly Afewerk Tekle, have forsaken the social critic role that artists are supposed to play. Dessalegn argues that

However, simplifying the complexities of the ESM, and blaming the entire movement for the Derg, the to-be repressive government that overthrew the imperial regime—of which sectors of the ESM themselves were to be victimized by—is an unfair reading. Especially when this is the only moment in Ethiopian history where Ethiopian students were the most active in both intellectual and political life—so much so that it was an international movement that spanned three continents. The writings of the students demonstrates not just the espousal of Marxist talking points because it was trending, but rather the active attempt of “moving the mountain,” so-to-speak, with what they saw was the revolutionary “mode of social resolution;”¹⁹⁹ or to use their own words, “The Marxist method of analysis lays bare the inner workings of social classes for it sees through every trick and cover, subterfuge and treachery.”²⁰⁰ Though the language used exudes a romantic image of Marxism, it nevertheless demonstrates the earnest attempts at using Marxist thought for indigenous purposes, especially in the realm of the national question.²⁰¹ The students looked out into the world and saw that the situation of Ethiopia was not unlike others. It might perhaps be the first time in Ethiopian history that a sector of the educated population put Ethiopia in context with the rest of the world as opposed

artists have a responsibility to reflect and critique the conditions of their country through their work, especially at a time when the majority of the Ethiopia population is suffering.

¹⁹⁹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 1.

²⁰⁰ “Editorial: Our Principles and Tasks in the Ethiopian Revolution,” *Challenge* XII, no. 1 (1972): 1.

²⁰¹ Ayalew Yimam, *The Ethiopian Student Movement and the National Question* (Maryland, Signature Books Printing, 2013): 47: “The ESM did not import Marxism-Leninism to find nationalism, but used it to further understand its causes and consequences, and suggested tactics to resolve the problem in the Ethiopian context.”

to reveling in the notion of Ethiopian exceptionalism that the victory at Adwa, among other historical events, had allowed.

Chapter 4

THE NATIONAL QUESTION

“If ethnic, regional and religious sectarianism do not in themselves serve the interests of the ruling class, they most certainly cannot serve the interests of the toiling masses.”²⁰²

- Hagos Gebre Yesus

There was perhaps nothing as divisive to the Ethiopian Student Movement as the debates over the national question. The diverse makeup of Ethiopia’s multi-ethnic state could not be overlooked as the dawn of the revolution made it a pertinent question needing answer in realizing what a new, equitable Ethiopia could look like. The national question came to the forefront of the ESM’s agenda in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s where the question was debated in the 17th Congress of ESUNA in September 1969 and was the topic of their February 1970 issue of *Challenge*. It was also discussed by ESUE in their 11th Congress of 1971; this is where the ideological battle within the movement began in earnest.²⁰³ Though the ideological split over the national question ushers in the complex sequence of events in the history of the ESM, it is best simplified as the struggle over

²⁰² *Challenge*, February 1970, 32.

²⁰³ Ellen Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory*, 120.

whether self-determination in the context of the national question (at one point termed regional question) or the class question was the preeminent problem in struggling to overthrow of feudalism and imperialism in a multi-national state like Ethiopia. Both groups of students used Marxist thinking in exploring national self-determination, but the conclusions they drew in the particulars of Ethiopia were quite different. The guiding tracts over these debates have been nicely termed the TT thesis and the TL thesis by Bahru Zewde: the former hailing the national question, and the latter the class question.²⁰⁴ It is through these tracts and the February 1970 issue of *Challenge*²⁰⁵ that this chapter will explore the roles nationality and ethnicity played in the students' definition of change and revolution.

The national question, or as ESANA/ESUNA would at this point term it, the “regional question,” was a matter taken up by ESANA/ESUNA’s September 1969 17th Congress. The February 1970 issue of *Challenge* was dedicated to documenting the written arguments that were presented for debate at the Congress and the resolutions made from them: The articles featured were “The Problems of Regionalism and Religion: Some Theoretical Considerations” by Andreas Eshete; “Problems of Regionalism in Ethiopia” by Hagos Gebre Yesus; “Problem of Religion in Ethiopia” by Melesse Ayalew; and “Regionalism and National Liberation: Some Observations” by Alem Habtu. Though they tackle different aspects of the national question and weave in the role and

²⁰⁴ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 202.

²⁰⁵ Though this issue of *Challenge* takes on both the questions of regionalism and religion, for the purposes of staying central to the national question, this chapter will only focus on their analysis of the role of nations and nationality in the Ethiopian people’s struggle.

appropriateness of self-determination to the situation of Ethiopia, all their pieces unite under the idea that regionalism and religion were one of the structures from which the Ethiopian poor were exploited and oppressed by the Ethiopian bourgeoisie, in allyship with Western imperialism.

4.1 The Walelign Mekonnen Thesis

One cannot begin the discussion of the national question in the ESM without first taking up with Walelign Mekonnen and his canon essay in the history of the ESM, “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia.” Bahru notes that there are various explanations that led to such a controversial writing, both of the materialist and psychoanalytical kind.²⁰⁶ However, what is important here is how the national question as articulated by Walelign impacted the succeeding arguments, whether in agreement or dissent, within the movement in the 1970s.

Walelign begins his essay by noting, much like Lenin in his “Imperialism: The Highest stage of Capitalism,” that he does not attempt to undertake an empirical study of the role nationality plays in the struggle against the regime, but rather to “provoke discussions on the ‘sacred,’ yet very important issue of this country—the Question of Nationalities.”²⁰⁷ Walelign argues that Ethiopia is not a nation but is rather “made up of a dozen nationalities with their own languages, ways of dressing, history, social

²⁰⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 199.

²⁰⁷ Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” November 17, 1969, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/nationalities.pdf>.

organization and territorial entity.” Hence, this is why that “in Ethiopia there is the Oromo Nation, the Tigray Nation, the Amhara Nation, the Gurage Nation,” and so on.

Walelign cringes away from the term tribal and does not at all employ region and regionalism in his formulations, but neither does he qualify whether “nation” can equally be applied or if the groups meet all the criteria of nationhood.²⁰⁸ He notes how the very image that Ethiopia evokes is one of Amhara-Tigray culture—a result of the chauvinism the bourgeois sector of this nationality has practiced throughout Ethiopian history:

To be a ‘genuine Ethiopian’ one has to speak Amharic, to listen to Amharic music, to accept the Amhara-Tigre Shamma in international conferences. In some cases to be an ‘Ethiopian,’ you will even have to change your name. In short to be an Ethiopian, you will have to wear an Amhara mask (to use Fanon’s expression).²⁰⁹

However, Walelign takes note to not essentialize cultural chauvinism as a predilection of the Amhara and Tigray. He notes: “Amharas are no dominant because of inherent imperialist tendencies. The Oromos could have done it, the Wellamos could have done it.”²¹⁰ Hence the real work of resistance must be the promotion of

a state in which all nationalities participate equally in state affairs...a state where every nationality is given equal opportunity to preserve and develop its language, its music and its history. [Ultimately]...a state where no nation dominates another nation be it economically or culturally.²¹¹

Walelign deals with the complication that the question of secession and class pose by arguing that “As long as secession is led by the peasants and workers and believes in

²⁰⁸ For example, one of the criteria Walelign employs is that of the common history, but what to make of the uncommon history that class differences necessarily bring with it?

²⁰⁹ Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question,” 1969.

²¹⁰ Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question,” 1969.

²¹¹ Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question,” 1969.

its internationalist obligation, it is not only to be supported but also militarily assisted.”

Like the Tilahun Taleke thesis that will be discussed in the succeeding section, Walelign argues that secession in and of itself need not be demonized. That the real question worth asking is whether the secessionist movement is “progressive or reactionary,” and of course whether it is socialist. However, Walelign does not confer a blanket rejection of secessionist movements were it to be determined that they are indeed reactionary. This could be because:

The revolution can start anywhere. It can even be secessionist to begin with, as long as led by the progressive forces—the peasants and the workers, and has the final aim the liberation of the Ethiopian Mass with due consideration to the economic and cultural independence of all the nationalities.²¹²

It seems that Walelign was of the opinion that one need not circumscribe the ways resistance manifests itself, be it secessionist or not, if it is led by the masses. In sum, Walelign reconciles the national question, the class question, and secession by maintaining that as long as the actors behind the movement or secession are of the peasantry and working class—whether their resistance manifests along nationalistic lines should be of no great worry since “in the long run Socialism is internationalism and a Socialist movement will never remain secessionist for good.”²¹³

Walelign’s 1969 formulations of the national question in the struggle against Haile Selassie’s empire, feudalism, and imperialism became the topic of more rigorous and empirical examination by that of the North American wing of the ESM in their 17th Congress, compiled in their February 1970 issue of their journal, *Challenge*.

²¹² Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question,” 1969.

²¹³ Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question,” 1969.

4.2 National Self-Determination

The first article by Andreas Eshete goes into the notion of self-determination and its bourgeois tendencies to argue how it may not neatly fit into the framework of a popular, working class and peasantry-based resistance movement that is necessarily multi-national. By noting how the Ethiopian bourgeoisie is aligned with the imperial government in class and political interests,²¹⁴ and noting how their version of self-determination is “the creation of a state which serves as the instrument for the fulfillment of the interests of the bourgeoisie,”²¹⁵ Andreas pushes for a nuanced take on national self-determination; one that has its basis an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist orientation.

It is not that Andreas was articulating a resistance to the entire notion of self-determination, but rather to point out how without taking into account the class basis of oppression which first and foremost unites all varieties of Ethiopian people to their relationship with their oppressors, calls of national self-determination fall flat. Especially because “These feudal crusaders did not exclude any of Ethiopia’s peoples from conquest on the basis of tribe, religion, language and culture. Rather they attempted to establish dependent relations between man and man through conquest and dispossession.”²¹⁶

²¹⁴ This is unlike that of the European where the bourgeois had an antagonistic relationship to the divine rights of kings.

²¹⁵ For Andreas, bourgeois revolutions never have in mind the material conditions of the immiserated masses. He writes: “...the bourgeois revolution is unable to provide a solution to the problems of religion and regionalism whose primary foundation is economic and social inequality. Further, the bourgeois revolution is dependent on imperialism, which in turn, relies on regional and religious domination” (17).

²¹⁶ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism and Religion: Some Theoretical Considerations,” *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1970): 19.

At the same time, however, Andreas takes care to note that the question of regionalism cannot be ignored in the fight for liberation, nor can the masses be blamed for characterizing their struggle along ethnic lines, (“secondary features” as Andreas puts it), when on the surface, their oppressions manifest themselves through such lines as well:

A people’s liberation movement takes up one of the many forms of oppression as a focus for mobilization at various stages of its struggle. Some of these are exclusively part of the secondary development peculiar to the concrete conditions of a particular people...The regional and religious domination of oppressed groups in Ethiopia is part of the overwhelming everyday reality of the masses.²¹⁷

4.3 Cass and National Self-Determination

That socioeconomic oppressions manifest themselves along ethnic lines while obscuring the primary class contradiction was also a point made by Hagos in the next article:

In Ethiopia as elsewhere, the problem is and has always been one of social injustices. This injustice necessarily involves and manifests itself in religious, linguistic and cultural oppressions. The basis of these oppressions is socioeconomic and political. This fact, as we shall see, is one which ruling classes, regardless of their ethnic and regional groupings, never forget.²¹⁸

This is because, as Alem Habtu concurs in the third article of this issue:

In a society where the economic basis of power is land (i.e. feudal property relations) and where the sphere of socio-economic relations is regional, the tendency of the ruling class as well as the ruled class is to embrace a regionalist outlook. Once the relationship between social structure and level of economic development is grasped, it is not difficult to see why feudalist ruling classes exploit regional differences.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism,” 20.

²¹⁸ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism,” 22.

²¹⁹ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism,” 47.

The ESUNA students, with the writings of the above three, conclude the primacy of the class contradiction while also still maintaining that the question of regionalism is another important, albeit secondary matter, that needs resolving in the liberation struggle.

Ethiopia's diverse make up, however, still pushes the question of national self-determination to the forefront. Hence, Andreas provides a sobering analysis of the role of self-determination in the Ethiopian context:

What needs to be stressed is the importance of empirical considerations to the principle of self-determination...it is crucial to the decision over the principle of self-determination to see if the primary development within which the principle found justification is met in the particular history of Ethiopia....In spite of these reservations on the relevance of the wider uses of the principle of self-determination to Ethiopia, there is an important legitimate content to the principle. It is important to fight for the equality of the regions and religions of Ethiopia.²²⁰

While noting that national self-determination is an important banner from which to wage the struggle against feudalism and imperialism, Andreas maintains that it is still important to have an empirical understanding of the conditions of the various groups in Ethiopia to determine the extent to which self-determination is possible. No one group has developed the same over time and being cognizant of this and correcting for it is crucial. While identifying the same issue, Hagos more explicitly argues that the way out “from the dangers of divisive regionalism and ethnocentricity is to adopt socialism which by definition, is one and the same act as being opposed to feudalism and imperialism.”²²¹

²²⁰ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism,” 16.

²²¹ Hagos Gebreyesus, “Problems of Regionalism in Ethiopia,” *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1970): 32.

As Bahru notes, the nuance and analysis that the articles provided were “not evident in the resolutions.”²²² The resolutions open with a clear-cut condemnation of regionalism along with feudalism and imperialism. It also “oppose[s] all separatist movements since their objective is contrary to the Ethiopian people’s emancipation from feudalism and imperialism”²²³ because it “regard[s] any movement based on separation or religion as essentially counter-revolutionary and detrimental to the struggle of the Ethiopian people against feudalism and imperialism.”²²⁴ The resolutions did not take into account the ways in which regionalism must be answered to in a way that does not betray the main contradiction of class—it outright condemned it and any groups that would want to secede. The question of secession in the Eritrean context was taken up most directly by Andreas, who argues that the separatist movement in Eritrea is one informed by the false notion that Eritrea, as a region of Ethiopia, is a colonized nation, separate from the development of the rest of the Ethiopian people. Andreas writes:

It has...been contended that certain regions in present Ethiopia have been subject to Ethiopian colonization... This, for example, has been part of the claim put forth by advocates of secession in Eritrea. But this rationale...rests on mistaken analysis. Colonization, even in a primitive form, requires manufacture production.²²⁵

This was a prerequisite Ethiopia did not possess. Hence “with feudalism, one can speak of conquest not colonization and this is quite a different matter.”²²⁶ That Andreas did not

²²² Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 205.

²²³ “Resolutions of the 17th Congress of ESUNA,” *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1970): 58.

²²⁴ “Resolutions of the 17th Congress of ESUNA,” 60.

²²⁵ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism,” 15.

²²⁶ Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism,” 15.

outright condemn secession and separatist movements (though he might have internally believed them counterproductive) could have been a rhetorical tactic to ensure that his position on self-determination does not get obscured. This, however, would have been in vain since the rather simplified resolutions garnered an infamous response written sometime in 1970, now termed the TT thesis.

4.4 The Tilahun Taleke and Tumtu Lencho Thesis

Though by August 1971, ESUE championed the national question as the preeminent problem to be solved in the fight against feudalism and imperialism, in a letter written to the 17th Congress of ESUNA (penned presumably in the months preceding September 1969), ESUE writes “The regional, ethnic and religious character that the agitation has occasionally assumed must not be allowed to obstruct the fundamental class struggle of national liberation.”²²⁷ It was not until the watered-down resolutions of ESUNA’s 17th Congress that the infamous Tilahun Takele (TT) thesis was published in response, hailing national self-determination as “‘nothing less than the right of ‘political self-determination, i.e. the right to secede and form a separate state’”²²⁸

Tilahun Takele (a pseudonym) bases his notion of nations and self-determination strictly in the Stalinist sense. Andreas Eshete’s article, which also uses Stalin and Lenin’s definition of nations and self-determination in his thinking, however, makes one sensitive to applying the term to the Ethiopian context without first judging whether the historical

²²⁷ “A message from the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe to the 17th Congress of ESUNA,” *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1970): 4a.

²²⁸ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 207.

conditions of Ethiopia warranted such a strict application. TT asserts that “Countries like Ethiopia...can be saved from national strife only if they recognized the right of ‘self-determination’ of the nations and nationalities within them.”²²⁹ Further, TT argued that with the recognition of self-determination came the right of secession, since “such a right is essential for a multi-national organization that has the agenda of overcoming feudalism and imperialism.”²³⁰ What is clear is that TT was concerned over the fact that “the outright condemnation of such movements or their demands and the rejection of their RIGHT to self-determination including secession is neither democratic, nor will it solve the problem.”²³¹ That the 17th Congress’ resolutions garnered such a response is not entirely surprising since it read like a resolute rejection of the national question as a problem not worth grappling with in the struggle against feudalism and imperialism.

TT maintained that the struggle cannot continue in earnest without the recognition of national self-determination, and the right to secede, for all nations and nationalities of Ethiopians—concurring with the Stalinist definition of nations that students in ESUNA also employed: “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”²³² Like Stalin, TT holds that the “right to secession does not mean, however, automatic support for all” and that the merits of

²²⁹ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 207.

²³⁰ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 207.

²³¹ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 207.

²³² Joseph Stalin, “Marxism and the National Question,” 1913, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>.

secession must be judged with the interests of the people and the struggle in mind as opposed to “the territorial integrity of the state.”²³³ While Andreas Eshete and Hagos Gebreyesus went into the details about how class interests disrupt or complicate the way the call for national self-determination might render a fallacious allyship between the proletariat and bourgeoisie of the same nation, TT rather believes that

The recognition and support of the right of secession by revolutionary Ethiopians, especially those from the dominant nations, will foster trust and fraternity among the various nationalities. We believe that the support of the right to secession will, by itself, discourage secession.²³⁴

This might be an idealistic understanding of how national self-determination would manifest itself in Ethiopia if prioritized, but it is nonetheless demonstrative of just how acute and preeminent the national question was becoming in the Ethiopian Student Movement.

The Tilahun Takele thesis garnered another pseudonymous response by Tumtu Lencho (in reality Andreas Eshete), titled the “Nationalities and Class Struggle in Ethiopia.” Here TL maintains that “the national question is and can only be subordinate to the class question”²³⁵ And so, in a more succinct manner than his *Challenge* article, TL reasons:

The national demands of the liberation movements are justified only in so far as they do not obstruct the anti-feudalist and the anti-imperialist minimum program and the maximum program of socialism that are on the revolutionary agenda of the backward countries in the new era.²³⁶

²³³ Stalin, “Marxism and the National Question.”

²³⁴ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 208.

²³⁵ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 209.

²³⁶ Bahru Zewde, *The Quest*, 210.

It is once more a sobered and circumstantial application of the calls for national self-determination that TL prescribes. If the goal that unites all the branches of the Ethiopian Student Movement is indeed the eradication of the double-bind that is feudalism and imperialism, backers of the TL thesis reason that national self-determination can be the most useful to the revolutionary agenda if the class question is not simultaneously obstructed—to be sure, a difficult line to toe. All the students grappling with the national question used Marxist analyses in the antagonistic conclusions they reached. Both the writers of the TL and TT theses cite Lenin and Stalin in their formulations; and although Walelign has no citations page, it is at least partly clear that his position on secessionism was quite Stalin and Lenin-esque.

The national question that tore asunder the fragile unity the ESM exhibited was quite like the one that had Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg in discord as well decades earlier—though Rosa Luxemburg’s name is nowhere to be found cited in these various essays. In her 1916 essay titled, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,”

Luxemburg notes early on that:

The position a workers’ party assumes on the nationality question, as on every other question, must differ in method and basic approach from the positions of even the most radical bourgeois parties, and from the positions of the Pseudo-socialistic, petit bourgeois parties. Social Democracy, whose political program is based on the scientific method of historical materialism and the class struggle, cannot make an exception with respect to the nationality question.²³⁷

²³⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” 1909, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1909/national-question/ch01.htm>.

This is the same argument Hagos Gebreyesus makes 56 years later.²³⁸ Luxemburg also argues:

[The right of nations to self-determination] does not indicate to the Russian proletariat in what way it should demand a solution of the Polish national problem, the Finnish question, the Caucasian question, the Jewish, etc. It offers instead only an unlimited authorization to all interested “nations” to settle their national problems in any way they like.²³⁹

In essence, Luxemburg is concerned with the practicality of asserting the right of all nations to self-determination when such assertion carries with it no specific plan nor sensitivity to the differences in ability to achieve such a thing, when by the admission of the proponents of national self-determination of *all* nations, each nation supposedly constitutes its own distinct language, culture, history and national character. This is the same concern over practicality that Andreas Eshete exhibited in his support for a more case-by-case, circumscribed notion of self-determination and secession. For Luxemburg and Andreas, a blanket statement simply recognizing the right of self-determination would not do. For Walelign, TT and Lenin, however, recognizing this right is essential, since, according to Lenin, “The bourgeois nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed against oppression, and it is this content that we unconditionally support. At the same time we strictly distinguish it from the tendency towards national exclusiveness.”²⁴⁰ This is because, as Walelign put it, “The revolution

²³⁸ Hagos Gebreyesus, “Problem of Regionalism in Ethiopia,” 32.

²³⁹ Rosa Luxemburg, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” 1909.

²⁴⁰ V.I. Lenin, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” 1914, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/self-det/ch04.htm>.

can start anywhere;”²⁴¹ hence, it would not do to circumscribe the crucial question of national self-determination in the goal of a socialist revolution in multi-national states.

The debates over such a divisive topic as the national question in Ethiopia was an expression of the BRT because even though there were sectors of the ESM who, through their strict reliance on Marxism made ahistorical observations of Ethiopia—there were those who did just the opposite. As in, those who espoused the utility of Marxism while understanding that they must first scrutinize the particularities of Ethiopia, while simultaneously putting her in context as an oppressed nation of the world, and suggest mature and nuanced modes of resolution as appropriate. This is an expression of Black Radical Tradition in the form of what Cedric Robinson describes as the Black radical intellectual. It is how through their use of Marxism and as members of the intelligentsia, the students made a class-conscious decision to commit class suicide in the politics they espoused. They did not exhibit a total rejection of Ethiopian history as commonly understood. They frequently referred to the 1896 Battle of Adwa and the courageous subsequent battles waged by the peasantry in their analysis, to contrast with Haile Selassie’s oppressive policies. They united with the countless peasant revolts and explicitly stated:

Equality between all regions and religions can be furthered by: using the authentic names of the oppressed regions; learning their languages, cultures and histories of the many regions and religions of Ethiopia; using the languages of the various regions of Ethiopia in materials for political education; recording the literature and history of the oppressed regions.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Walelign Mekonnen, “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” November 17, 1969, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/nationalities.pdf>.

²⁴² Andreas Eshete, “The Problems of Regionalism and Religion: Some Theoretical Considerations,” *Challenge X*, no. 1 (1970): 20.

This of course does not negate the fact they did indeed dispense with aspects of Ethiopian history; their Marxist-Leninist point of view showed that it was not a history of the people, per se, but of kings, queens, and their trail of lords and ladies-in-waiting. It is true that they broke with their ideological predecessors because their predecessors did not challenge Haile Selassie's government in the radical ways they believed the times called for. However, every new generation of intellectuals whether it be in art, philosophy, or history in one way or another rejects the ways and methods of their predecessors as the changing times and conditions call for it. This study then asks, why reserve this particular criticism for members of the Ethiopian Student Movement? Is it solely in the attempt to emphasize its failures? To deal with this question and more, the final section of this thesis will take up how the ESM fits into the larger, global phenomenon of Black radicalism. And further, interrogate whether their ultimate failure eliminates them from being studied as revolutionary elites in their own right.

Chapter 5

AN ENDING

“Our movement has a lot to learn from the history of our country. But in the process of evaluating the past, we have to avoid the excessive glorification of what often goes as the history of independent Ethiopia”²⁴³

- *Challenge* Editorial board

5.1 Constellating the Ethiopian Student Movement and the Black Radical

Tradition

It is now appropriate to revisit Amilcar Cabral’s formulations of the revolutionary elites in formerly colonized or imperially dominated countries and Cedric Robinson’s arguments about the Black intelligentsia. Cabral provides a rough sketch of the trajectories that the national bourgeoisie can take in their role as leaders of a new, often multi-national countries. They could either “ally themselves to the colonialist” or commit “suicide as a class, to be restored to life in the condition of a revolutionary worker completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which [they]

²⁴³ “EDITORIAL: Imperialism and National Liberation,” *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1971): 1.

belong.”²⁴⁴ It is what he calls the re-Africanization process whereby the revolutionary elite is made one among the masses of her people and their struggles become her own. It is where she turns the intellectual rigor of her pen to the articulation of the needs and aspirations of said masses—breaking with her petty-bourgeois class interests. This is the same phenomenon Cedric Robinson recognizes among the Black intelligentsia among W.E.B. Dubois, CLR James, and Richard Wright in the last section of *Black Marxism*.

In this final section of his magnum opus, Robinson challenges the argument that posits that Black radical resistance as a consciousness and movement that was largely a product of the 20th century. This argument rests on the basis that the period of enslavement did not produce the radical consciousness commensurate with that of the 20th century and so lacked the grounds to be conceptualized as a tradition. Robinson of course spends a couple hundred pages discounting this argument. One of the ways he does this is by pointing to the limits of the very way we periodize history; what Robinson characterizes as a system of periodization that fails to properly place “Black revolutionary thinkers.”²⁴⁵

What Cabral identifies as the revolutionary elite then is the same phenomenon that Robinson sees within the Black intelligentsia. Robinson offers a sketch of the evolution of this black radical consciousness vested within the revolutionary elite that encounters Marxism, makes use of it, but eventually supersedes it because of Marxism’s

²⁴⁴ Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, 136.

²⁴⁵ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 176: Breaking from traditional ways of organizing history would also serve in understanding the way a radical consciousness can emerge among the Ethiopian students, rather than strictly tying certain trends to what can be the arbitrary nature of centuries and decades. However, this is a topic for another study.

ultimate failure to deal with the true negation of capitalist society in the forms of the colonial looting of Africa and enslaved and expropriated Black labor. Robinson goes further, however, by noting how the revolutionary culture developed by the Black masses was a product of their ties to their Africanity as opposed to an inheritance from a Black elite:

Capitalism had produced its social and historical negations in both poles of its expropriation: capitalist accumulation gave birth to the proletariat at the manufacturing core; “primitive accumulation” deposited the social base for the revolutionary masses in the peripheries. But what distinguished the formations of these revolutionary classes was the source of their ideological and cultural developments. While the European proletariat had been formed through and by the ideas of the bourgeoisie...in Haiti and presumably elsewhere among the slave populations, the Africans had constructed their own revolutionary culture.²⁴⁶

This is pertinent to the Ethiopian Student Movement because one of the common indictments against it is that it is a simple product of Marxism, and hence European thought. That the students broke with parts of Ethiopian history was a further affirmation of this—even though this very same assertion is complicated by the fact they heavily identified with other aspects of Ethiopian history. What is more, that the students saw themselves in the same struggle against those fighting racism in the U.S or other African revolutionaries fighting their former colonizers has not been sufficiently engaged with as evidence of their Pan-African consciousness. Was this also a product of a cultural dislocation? Was it a retaliation to a betrayal of a legacy?²⁴⁷ Or was it a genuine proclamation of solidarity—what they saw as the similar history, and hence destiny, of all

²⁴⁶ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 275.

²⁴⁷ Messay Kebede, *Cultural Dislocation*, 43.

oppressed peoples. In locating the BRT within anti-colonial African resistance movements, Robinson writes:

The very nature of colonial dominance required the adaptation or creation of privileged strata among the dominated people. And from the conflict, which was inevitable between the native ‘bourgeoisie’ and their colonial masters, a renegade intelligentsia was induced, one to which the idea of a total opposition, a nationalist confrontation and critique of Western society was necessary and natural. While the nationalists generally confined their attentions to the struggles at home where their ambitions could most immediately be realized, *the radical nationalists were really internationalists, settling into variants of Pan-Africanism or socialism* [my emphasis].²⁴⁸

This study points to the Black Radical Tradition as a holistic framework that challenges the proponents of the rather all-too-simple thesis of cultural dislocation. By exploring the students’ relationship to Ethiopian history of resistance, their sobered analysis of liberation whilst employing Marxism, and their role as the intelligentsia, this chapter will synthesize the Ethiopian students’ iteration of black radicalism and identify its successes and pitfalls.

5.2 Ethiopian History

Robinson notes that the Black intelligentsia’s “brilliance was...derivative. The truer genius was in the midst of the people of whom they wrote.”²⁴⁹ This sector of the Black intelligentsia, the revolutionary elite, is who Robinson picks as his case study to track the evolution of their political consciousness—a consciousness that was fostered and tempered by a history of Black mass resistance that these intellectuals acquainted themselves with. The Ethiopian students experienced this same change in consciousness

²⁴⁸ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 312.

²⁴⁹ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 184.

by noting how multiple times that their role was to be in support of the popular struggles waged by the peasantry in various parts of the country. They also refer to the history of resistance, specifically in the war for independence, by raising up those who wielded the weapons and died by the thousands to make sure Ethiopia was indeed free from foreign domination—the peasantry. They did this while at the same time critiquing the bourgeois version of this narrative; a narrative they believed served the interests of the ruling class of maintaining the neo-coloniality of Ethiopia:

Our movement has a lot to learn from the history of our country. But in the process of evaluating the past, we have to avoid the excessive glorification of what often goes as the history of independent Ethiopia. The ruling class always celebrated the so-called history of independent Ethiopia in order to provide historical legitimacy for its continued rule and acquire a propaganda cover for the neo-colonization of the country.²⁵⁰

For the students, the history of resistance became a guiding theme for the struggle they wished to wage or join. In addition to understanding their country's present, the students used Ethiopia's history as a tool for empowerment and a model for replication as it served them best. It was not a complete affirmation of Ethiopian history for history's sake; especially since, as noted before, the recorded history of Ethiopia has largely been one of kings, the nobility, and the Orthodox Church.

5.3 Seduction of Marxism

This study has shown how both the wholesale and circumscribed usage of Marxian thought in the formulations of Ethiopia's socioeconomic context among the students, and their subsequent rationalizations and basis of their struggle has not been

²⁵⁰ "EDITORIAL: Imperialism and National Liberation," *Challenge* XI, no. 1 (1971): 1.

efficiently distinguished. For some, by virtue of using Marxism, the students were culturally dislocated and using Eurocentric epistemologies to make sense of an area of the world decidedly not in Europe. Though the Ethiopian students may not have sufficiently criticized Marxian thought as they were employing it, their earnest attempts at applying it to Ethiopian history and social developments should not be seen as an aberration; a position fueled by Ethiopian exceptionalist tendencies. What would be more apropos, however, is to investigate the appeals of Marxism as a mode for articulating their resistance that so enveloped students more than any other forms. As Bahru notes, the students were quite keen on understanding the history and culture of Ethiopia and understanding where that fit into the world they wished to build. Marxism, and its liberatory potential, its vestment of power in the masses for the potential of radical change (despite being a theoretical formulation of the petit-bourgeois *for* the masses as opposed to by the masses for the masses²⁵¹), was a framework hard to ignore—especially when the invigoration of the New Left and anti-colonial struggles in the parts of Africa were using such rhetoric to articulate and wage their struggle. The Ethiopian students cannot be divorced from this context. The students themselves addressed this in the early 70s:

There is the view, which sounds an alarm off and on, that the Ethiopian Student Movement is simply copying the socialisms of Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Albania, et al. This accusation is groundless. There is no such thing as Chinese socialism just as there can be no Ethiopian socialism. But there is socialism in China and will be in the not-too-distant future in Ethiopia. The principles of Marxism must be applied in our country in the concrete, and this hardly is a whole sale importation of Marxism.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 275.

²⁵² “Editorial: Our Principles and Tasks in the Ethiopian Revolution,” *Challenge* XII, no. 1 (1972): 7.

The students' sobered use of Marxism is best exemplified by what is termed "Rejjim Guzoism" (translates to long journey from Amharic). There was a recognition that the struggle they were waging against feudalism and imperialism, and against Haile Selassie's empire, was not a battle won swiftly, or easily. It was their iteration of what Robinson identifies as "only the promise of liberation."²⁵³ In the July 1971 issue of *Challenge*, an article with the penname "Rejjim Guzo" appears and opens thus:

Any serious revolutionary knows that the road to revolution is never a direct one, never a straight line proceeding smoothly from one step to the next. The struggle is a protracted one, with many ups and downs. The preparatory stages are likewise complex and long drawn, with their own demands for much painstaking work and planning.²⁵⁴

The mature view of the work ahead of them is not earnestly explored within most of the extant literature—save perhaps Bahru's seminal 2014 book. The students also pull from their own history of political development to extrapolate the future of their role in continuing the struggle. In an article titled "The Lessons of December, 1969,"²⁵⁵ the students write:

Without an organization the enemy cannot be defeated. For our struggles will remain spontaneous and uncoordinated, and the autocracy and the Yankee imperialists will find it an easy task to suppress us one by one. And thus whoever understands the protracted nature of the class struggle that is going to take place in Ethiopia cannot fail to grasp the importance and necessity of organizing ourselves.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Robin D.G. Kelley, "Foreword," *Black Marxism*, xxvii.

²⁵⁴ Rejjim Guzo, "Mass Struggle Versus Focoism," *Challenge* XI, no. 2 (1971): 67.

²⁵⁵ December 1969 refers to the murder of the student leader Tilahun Gizaw.

²⁵⁶ "The Lessons of December, 1969," *ESANA Newsletter* II, no. 12 (1970): 13.

Rather than an idealistic espousal of Marxism and revolution, the students demonstrated a matured take on the gravity of resisting against the imperial regime and building a new society. When Robinson explores the Black radical encounters with Marxian thought (through the life and works of DuBois, James, and Wright) he finds that each saw its uses, at one point or another endorsed it, but eventually broke from it. This political trajectory may have been what the students themselves would have achieved was their momentum not cut short by the repressive actions of the Derg.

5.4 The Black intelligentsia as the Revolutionary Elite

The students also exemplified the Black Radical Tradition in the awareness of their class position and their role as articulators of the ideas and motions of the national revolutionary movement. In the early 60s, they note that they wish to throw their lot with the masses, breaking with the long practice of rubberstamping the imperial regime that the educated elites before them partook in. This consciousness indeed was part and parcel of their excavation and discovery of an Ethiopian peoples' history of resistance—noting that the revolutionary subject of history is indeed the everyday farmer and worker whose labor is the engine of a prosperous Ethiopia. Marxism helped them understand that, but it was the people's material condition and bloody war of independence that inspired them to resist Haile Selassie, a colluding ruler they saw as detrimental to the development of Ethiopia, in their own time.

Part of this was the realization that they must learn the history, languages, and cultures of the many people that make up Ethiopia in order to build the socialist Ethiopia they imagined was possible once the double-bind of feudalism and imperialism were eradicated. Hence, they advocated education not for its sake but for the liberation of

Ethiopian people, thus marking their transition into revolutionary elites. In *Revolution This Time: Toward a New Africa*, Maloba formulates it thus:

The revolutionary elite will emerge from these conditions embracing the Western cultural domination that produces confusion and even self-degradation. They will, through the valiant efforts of the revolutionary party, focus on education for liberation, thus moving from the educated elite to the revolutionary elite.²⁵⁷

Following their 16th Annual Congress, ESANA/ESUNA publishes their resolutions on Ethiopian education after noting that Ethiopian education as it currently stood was riddled with elitism, individualism, and divorced from the community. They argue that “the present education system aims at training a selected, limited section of the Ethiopian people for rationalizing the oppression of the present regime through the bureaucracy and its other agencies.” Here, they refer to the education system that was first established by the Jesuits when Haile Selassie I University first opened, and then later taken over by the Americans. They resolve that a complete overhaul of this system that brings in an educational system that is egalitarian, “cultivate[s] a commitment to social justice and responsibility,” focuses on the “Ethiopian environment,” and labor as an “inseparable element” of its *raison d’être* is apropos.²⁵⁸

Despite being students of Western epistemologies, they understood that liberatory education was a crucial element in developing among the students the ability to become harbingers of revolution. Moreover, education was important for the political awakening and the empowerment of the masses. That is why they resolve that

²⁵⁷ W.O. Maloba, *Revolution This Time*, 213.

²⁵⁸ Proceedings and Resolutions of the Sixteenth Annual Congress of Ethiopian Student Union in North America held from August 29 to September 2, 1968, in New Haven, Connecticut.

The distance between the schools and the community should be minimized. Labor in the community should be an important part of our education. Provincial schools should be parts of the farms where students learn skills while sharing the financial burden of their education. Similarly, urban schools should be integrated with industrial shops. Further, in the communities surrounding the schools, students should engage in community projects.²⁵⁹

Their privileged role as the black intelligentsia did not silo them in the hallowed halls of the ivory towers even though some went to some of the most prestigious schools in the world. The intimate acquaintance they had with Western civilization, be it through living in the metropolises or reading classical Western philosophy, did not divorce all of them from their homeland. Some might have returned with the express goal to Westernize Ethiopia while others became committed to making sure Ethiopia is totally free from such a destiny. Rather, that they were able to critique Western civilization for the political purpose of removing the dominating influences of Western imperialism can be because they were so intimate with it.

This study has attempted to address the concerns raised by Elleni Centime Zeleke in the studies regarding the Ethiopian Student Movement. She writes:

The questions and answers posed by the student movement are hardly ever linked to longer social, political, or economic trajectories that have framed Ethiopian, African, or even global history, and neither the student movement nor the revolution is analysed in terms of policy impacts or continuities with other African or third world countries.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ Proceedings and Resolutions of the Sixteenth Annual Congress of Ethiopian Student Union in North America held from August 29 to September 2, 1968, in New Haven, Connecticut.

²⁶⁰ Elleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory*, 9.

By using the Black Radical Tradition as a framework for inquiry, this study has told a more empathetic story about the ESM and their resistance to Haile Selassie's regime and Ethiopia's subservience to the West as part of the larger pattern of Black liberation struggles—rather than as aberration in Ethiopian history.

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